

Cheltenham Borough Council elections, May 2026.

Labour Party Election statement.

2026 – a unique election

Cheltenham Borough Council will only exist for one more year. In 2027, it will be replaced by a new 'unitary' council that will combine the responsibilities of the current County Council and the various district councils into one new body, with a reduced number of councillors. These councillors will be elected in fresh elections in May 2027, so it's that election that will be about the long-term future of Cheltenham and the rest of Gloucestershire.

The upcoming 2026 elections are therefore essentially about what happens in Cheltenham in the coming year, up to May 2027.

Cheltenham Labour Party is contesting these elections with some very specific proposals on how the Council should be run in this final year of operation.

Business as usual for the next 12 months, but with greater scrutiny

We think it's vital that the Council focuses on its regular services to the residents of Cheltenham and not be sidetracked by what happens after next year. These services and activities include:

- Refuse collection
- Street cleaning
- Maintenance of council-owned housing
- Off-street car-parking
- Dealing with planning applications
- Parks and gardens
- Support for cultural events
- Golden Valley development

Political parties fighting an election will often promise to reduce the level of council tax or find significant savings. But there is no realistic opportunity

to do that in this election; the Council has already approved its budget and the level of council tax to be charged has already been agreed for 2026/27.

Proposal 1: Labour will ensure a 'business as usual' approach for the coming year, but with proper scrutiny and accountability.

Labour thinks it's dishonest to claim that radical changes in services or the level of council tax in the next 12 months are possible.

Voters should beware of any political party which claims this can be done.

However, we do think that some changes are needed and are long overdue.

A more challenging opposition

The Council needs a challenging opposition to take on the massive majority held by the ruling LibDem administration. Only 4 out of the 40 councillors are currently from opposition parties and with the best will in the world such a small group cannot provide an effective opposition across all the committees and functions of the Council. In particular, members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be opposition councillors with knowledge and confidence to challenge the leadership of the Council where necessary. At the moment 8 out of the 10 members of the committee are from the ruling LibDem group. This can't be right. We believe that adding Labour councillors to the mix would make a real difference in effectively challenging the ruling administration.

Improved financial scrutiny

Councillors must be more open in what they tell the public about the Council's financial affairs, and in particular about specific projects. Too often project finances are designated as 'commercial in confidence' and discussed behind closed doors, with the press and the public excluded. Frequently, even the topic under discussion isn't revealed in council papers. Examples from councils in other parts of the country, such as Woking, demonstrate that where there is inadequate scrutiny of financial decisions, there is a risk of serious financial consequences. We believe that the public should have timely and accurate information about what is going on in our council. Four projects are of particular concern.

- The Golden Valley Development

- The Minster Exchange
- The attempted sale of Gloucestershire Airport
- The sale of the Municipal Offices

Proposal 2: Labour calls for much greater transparency in the financial activities of the Council and much more rigorous scrutiny of financial decision-making.

Protecting Cheltenham's 'legacy'

With the imminent demise of the Borough council, and the transfer of its assets and liabilities to a new council, councillors must do everything possible to ensure that the liabilities are minimised and the assets are protected.

Finance

Proposal 3: Labour councillors will work to ensure that the finances of the Council are handed over in good standing to the new Unitary council.

We will oppose spending on short-term pet projects in the interim.

Housing

The same issues apply to council-owned social housing. The takeover of Cheltenham Borough Homes by the Council means that the responsibility for social housing will pass to the new unitary council. In the short time remaining before that happens, the Council must ensure that the claimed savings are used to enhance the housing stock rather than being used to cover the financial deficits elsewhere in the CBC budget plan. In particular we need to ensure that the housing maintenance budget is maintained at its previous level to support social housing tenants rather than used to meet other CBC financial liabilities.

Proposal 4: Labour councillors will seek to ensure that borough council-owned social housing is handed over to the new unitary council in good repair and with satisfied tenants.

Swindon Road Recycling Centre

The closure of the Swindon Road recycling centre has been a significant loss for Cheltenham residents and a blow to the commitment to run an environmentally friendly council. We understand that maintaining the centre entails significant costs and that the Borough Council does not have a legal duty to provide such facilities to the public. However, after 2027, ownership of the Swindon Road facility will pass to the new Unitary Council which will have such a legal duty. The Swindon Road facility can then be integrated into the county recycling service. We have concerns that its lengthy closure will lead to a significant deterioration in the physical state of the centre, and make this transfer more difficult.

Proposal 5: Labour calls for the Swindon Road recycling facility to be retained and passed to the new Unitary Council in good working order.

The post-2027 future

Although not really issues for these 2026 elections, we wish to state for the record Cheltenham Labour Party's position on two key points in the post-2027 landscape.

Proposal 6: Labour thinks that the best new structure for Gloucestershire will be a single Unitary Council for the whole of Gloucestershire.

We disagree with the decision taken by the LibDem-dominated Cheltenham Brough Council to propose that Gloucestershire is split into two unitary councils (East and West). We will know by the summer what decision the government has taken on this.

Proposal 7: Labour agrees with the Council that the best long-term regional strategic future for Gloucestershire is to be part of the West of England Combined Authority (WECA), and we oppose Reform's proposal to join a 'Mercia' Combined Authority.

The current council should not pre-empt decisions of the new Unitary Council

The new unitary Council will take over all the functions of Cheltenham Borough Council and those of the County Council, and it will assume

ownership of all the assets of the current seven borough and district councils in Gloucestershire. There are two significant decisions still to be made where we consider it would be premature to try to take decisions now, *before* the new Unitary Council can decide how to proceed.

The governance of Cheltenham

Part of the Government's discussion about the move to unitary authorities has been how best to provide lower level, more local, democratic structures. Cheltenham currently has five parishes (this could shortly become six). However, more than half the town is 'unparished'; 11 wards are not covered by a parish council. The Council is consulting over whether there should be a parish (or town) council to cover all the 'unparished' areas of Cheltenham. We agree that all areas of Cheltenham should be covered by parish councils, but it's too soon to decide on exactly how this should be done, and in particular how many new 'parishes' there should be. It's also a decision that more properly sits with the new unitary authority, not the outgoing council.

Proposal 8: Labour calls for a pause in making decisions on how Cheltenham should be governed at parish level in the future. The new Unitary Council, once elected, will decide which of the functions currently undertaken by Cheltenham Borough Council it will take over and which will be delegated to parishes. Only then does it make sense to consult on the future governance of Cheltenham.

Gloucestershire Airport

The recent collapse of the sale of Gloucestershire Airport provides an opportunity to consider its long-term future afresh. The Airport is jointly owned by Cheltenham and Gloucester Councils, Tewkesbury Council is the planning authority, and Gloucestershire County Council is responsible for transport planning. A real muddle! Cheltenham Borough Council can't take unilateral decisions about the Airport's future. However, after 2027 the new Unitary Council will be the owner of the Airport, and the planning authority, and responsible for transport strategy.

Proposal 9: Labour calls for a pause in attempts to sell Gloucestershire Airport until the new Unitary Council can decide on the future transport strategy for Gloucestershire.

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