

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation

A challenge to the prospective
Parliamentary candidates of Darlington
anticipating the 2019 General Election 12th December 2019

Produced by the Christian Community
of Darlington

The associated website can be found at

www.churchindarlington.org.uk/commongood

Contents

1	Introduction.....	3
2	The Christian Context.....	4
3	What is the Common Good?.....	4
3.1	We believe in the dignity and value of every single life.....	5
3.2	We believe in community.....	5
3.3	We believe in mutual accountability.....	5
3.4	We believe in democracy.....	5
3.5	We believe in politics.....	5
4	Contemporary Political Issues and the Common Good.....	5
4.1	The Brexit Question.....	5
4.2	The Economy.....	6
4.3	Employment.....	6
4.4	Peace and Security.....	7
4.5	Caring for Planet Earth.....	7
4.6	The injustice of Homelessness.....	7
4.7	Welcoming the stranger – Asylum and Immigration.....	8
4.8	Religious Faith in Public Life.....	8
4.9	Criminal Justice.....	8
4.10	The gap between rich and poor.....	9
4.11	Life and Death.....	10
4.12	Social Care.....	10
4.13	Health and Well-being.....	10
4.14	Equality and Diversity.....	10
4.15	Education and Young People.....	11
4.16	The Voluntary Sector.....	11
5	What we expect of our political representative.....	11
6	Conclusion.....	12
7	References and acknowledgements.....	13

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

1 Introduction

The announcement of a December Election by Prime Minister Johnson was not a surprise after the October Brexit deadline passed. It is just two years since the last General Election. Parliament has been rendered impotent by the Brexit stalemate, and so this election, like the last, will be an election coloured by Brexit. Indeed, some would argue that this election is a referendum in disguise. However, it is not. Brexit cannot be dismissed, but the election is about five years of government, with all that that entails domestically and internationally.

It has become traditional that the churches of Darlington organise a hustling event. It is part of that event that candidates are invited to respond in advance to a series of questions posed within a paper prepared by members of the Christian community. Their responses form a kind of moral contract between the candidate and the voter.

The paper that the churches prepare builds upon the theme of the common good, a concept that looks back to seminal report entitled “*The Common Good*” published in October 1996 by the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales. Though parts of this document are now dated - both society and Church’s social teaching have moved on - the core notion of the common good still holds true. The ‘common good’ is that *network of social conditions which enable all of us to flourish as dignified, responsible, human beings living meaningful lives free from fear, coercion, and inequalities of opportunity or of the benefits of our society*. “Common” implies “all inclusive”; the common good cannot exclude or exempt any section of the population. Pursuing the common good is a Christian obligation.

The title of this paper is *The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation*. It is the seventh such document, following up earlier documents produced for the elections of 1997 (*Towards the Common Good in Darlington*), 2001 (*Passion for the Common Good in Darlington*), 2005 (*Grounding the Common Good in Darlington*), 2010 (*Integrity and Purpose: The Common Good in Darlington*), 2015 (*Regaining the Common Good in Darlington*), 2017 (*The Common Good at the Centre in Darlington*).

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation

The Christian Church has a strong record of positive engagement with social issues. Indeed, social concern is woven into the Christian faith tradition (see reflection below). What is true for the wider church is true for Christian individuals in Darlington. As they seek to live out their faith through work, leisure, interests, and relationships, they engage with, and influence, the body politic, illuminating concepts like community, citizenship, and social responsibility from the perspective of Christian belief. Of course, in saying this, we are not suggesting that the views of those who do not share a Christian belief are not equally valid. On the contrary. That is why we have held on to the term common good - the good of all - as the ground of our commitment; this term we believe embraces and unites the commitment of both Christian and non-Christian in common purpose.

Although shaped by Christian reflection, this document is not intended to promote any particular faith agenda, nor is it a party political document. The aim throughout is to create the ‘thinking space’ for all of us, the people of Darlington, to think about how we may best work together towards the common good. Within this, we have three primary objectives:

- i) To offer prospective Parliamentary candidates an opportunity to explain to their electorate what drives and inspires them to stand for Parliament and represent Darlington.
- ii) To enable the electorate to decide, having gained an insight into the way each candidate thinks, how they may best use their vote to further the common good.
- iii) To facilitate a positive engagement between candidates and electorate.

This document will be presented to each Parliamentary candidate with a request to make a written response to the questions raised. The replies will be published in full on our website: www.churchindarlington.org.uk/commongood and circulated among the churches. Candidates are invited to take part in a public ‘Question Time’ on 2nd December 2019.

We hope that through this initiative, we will harness the determination of the Darlington community to work for the common good and that, as a community, we will elect the right person to the very important position of Darlington’s MP.

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

2 *The Christian Context*

Christian belief influences the way Christians see the world. This section is therefore intended, with very broad brush strokes, to root this document within the Christian faith. The brush strokes are inevitably broad because many of the most pressing issues that face and divide contemporary society divide the Christian the community too.

A key biblical passage linking faith to social justice is known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew's gospel, chapters 5-7). It is significant that Jesus began this sermon not by interpreting the law or with ethical codes but by describing people. Those described as blessed are those who know their own poverty, who do not guard themselves against sorrow, who are gentle, who long to see right prevail, who are generous in forgiveness and pure in heart, who make peace and who willingly suffer the consequences of making a public stand for what is good. What Jesus here describes is not so much an ordered piety as a generous humanity. Intuitively, one knows that these are not the people who will be found guarding the world's concentration camps or at the forefront of hatred that divides. Nor do they feed resentments, or keep alive un-forgiven ills and ancient quarrels. They do not cry out for recognition, or parade their virtue for our admiration. They stand tall and are remembered long after their contribution has been made.

We believe that a generous humanity is the bedrock of the common good. It is worked out not through rules and regulations but through the priority of love. Jesus expressed it succinctly: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself."* Love, of course, is not a term that is in regular use in political debate, but at the very deepest level we believe it is its primary context. When, for example, thousands of people spontaneously donate money in response to disaster, or to take to the street in protest when liberty is threatened, they are asserting that through giving of themselves (a loving response) they can make a difference to the world. We do not believe, therefore, that it is inappropriate for politicians to reflect upon, for example, how love should respond to the plight of those seeking asylum, to the gap between the rich and poor, or to the request by an individual for assistance in ending their life.

The manifesto offered by Jesus to *'love one's neighbour as oneself'* is set in the context of loving God. On this basis, we believe that a healthy society must acknowledge human spirituality, in whatever form it emerges. In addition, the fact that the manifesto is 'neighbour'-centred exploits the inherent ambiguity of this key term: it is about working for the good of the person who lives next door as well as working for one's neighbour suffering injustice on the other side of the world.

Darlington is a relatively small town, but its political agenda cannot exist in isolation from global concerns. Turning points in the human story, moments of great significance, are formed from a thousand small decisions and a *milieu* of shared purpose. We believe that a responsible and thoughtful use of one's right to vote can change the world for the good of all its citizens.

3 *What is the Common Good?*

"The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies." Pope Francis

The notion of the common good can be traced back two millennia to the writing of Aristotle. He argued that a human life can be judged good when it is shaped by the relatively consistent pursuit of ends that are themselves good. Unpacking this idea he came to the significant conclusion that a good life is oriented to goods shared with others – the common good of the larger society of which one is a part. Thus the good of the individual and the good of society are intimately linked.

Although, from a Christian perspective, the idea of the common good has been refined and earthed by the teaching of Jesus, its origin in Aristotelian ethics renders it unsurprising that the principles and values that ultimately emerge as the precursor to a 'good society' appeal as much to the Christian as to those without faith. This document is earthed in that understanding. It is written by Christians, but from a perspective that transcends Christianity.

Offering a comprehensive definition of the common good is not the purpose of this document. There are, however, some key beliefs that are intrinsic to the concept which, because they impinge upon what the common good means for Darlington, which we here state:

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

3.1 *We believe in the dignity and value of every single life*

Central to our understanding of the common good is the dignity and value of every human life. As Christians, we would link this to the belief that every life is a gift of God, created in the divine image; others may come to the same view by a different route. By virtue of our shared humanity, we have an obligation to respect and honour one another. Each individual brings a unique gift to the world that must not be disregarded and the integrity of that gift must be respected and protected at every point.

Fundamental to human dignity and human value is human freedom. A good society respects human freedom by enabling men and women to take responsibility for their own history as independent and interdependent people. To deprive people of such freedom diminishes and devalues them.

3.2 *We believe in community*

We are most human when we know ourselves to be dependent on others. Therefore, individuals have a claim on each other and on society for certain basic minimum conditions without which the value of human life is diminished. These 'minimum conditions' are expressed as human rights that are universal and inalienable: religious liberty, decent work, housing, health care, freedom of speech, education, and the right to raise and provide for a family. Everyone has a duty to the common good in order that the rights of others can be satisfied and their freedoms protected. Those whose freedoms are being denied should be helped to claim them.

3.3 *We believe in mutual accountability*

Contemporary society has become preoccupied by the concept of personal autonomy - it has become "me" centred ... *my* rights, *my* life and *in my* best interest. We believe that this notion must always be tempered by the recognition that as people we are diminished if *we have* and others do not. The plight of refugees or the hunger of many of our school children judges us; we are accountable to them.

3.4 *We believe in democracy*

Although, as Christians, we would wish to refine the belief in democracy by the phrase 'under God', we believe in a system where everyone has a voice and where every voice is significant. We believe that democracy is an expression of a collective and mutually responsible form of governance that, in

an ideal situation, should exclude no one from the decision making process.

Democracy is diminished by voter apathy. To be able to vote in a free election is a hard-won privilege. Government should, through electoral and constitutional reform, and through processes like devolution, do all that they can to demonstrate to people that their views and their vote truly matter.

3.5 *We believe in politics*

The UK political system has evolved over generations. At its best it encloses proper debate, proper consultation, and a genuine commitment to the common good. We do not, however, support overtly adversarial politics where party is promoted over principle and where politicians resort to demeaning and mocking those who disagree with them. Adversarial politics has bequeathed an adversarial approach to ideas in which one's opponents must be wholly wrong and self-criticism is never legitimate. In our 2001 document, "Passion for the Common Good", we called for a "re-moralising" of politics. We still believe it is a legitimate call.

4 *Contemporary Political Issues and the Common Good*

Theory must be rooted in real issues that touch local, national and international communities. Any prospective MP, if elected, will have to confront these real issues and seek to answer them. In this section, some of what we believe to be the greatest challenges to the common good are laid out. These challenges give rise to the questions that we want to address to the Parliamentary Candidates, the answers to which will enable the electorate to gain some insight into the values, moral judgement and ethical principles which shape their view of the world. (The issues presented below, are not presented in order of importance.)

4.1 *The Brexit Question*

Brexit was earlier identified as the sub-text to every question posed here; the decision made by the British people to leave the European Union in June 2016 has brought us to this election. Since that momentous decision, millions of words have been expended in trying to discern its real significance. Argument and counter argument over the legality of this decision and that, whether the vote of the people should be overturned, whether Brexit should be 'hard' or 'soft', have been

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

repeated *ad-nauseam*. People are weary of it. Whether one voted for or against the dissolution of ties with Europe, we are where we are. We must now move forward – to do anything else would be to sacrifice the meaning of democracy.

Questions

4.1.1 *If you had a crystal ball in which you could envision our country in two years' time, aside from party posturing and political dogma, where do you feel we will be? Will the country be better or worse off?*

4.1.2 *This election has incontrovertibly been called by Prime Minister Johnson as a way of breaking the Brexit deadlock. His hope is for a mandate to “get it done”. Should empowering a leader for the negotiation be the voter’s priority, rather than voting for the manifesto of a party?*

4.2 The Economy

The last election was fought against a background of austerity, but now it appears that there is money to spend in abundance. What has changed? General government gross debt was £1,821.3 billion at the end of the financial year ending March 2019, equivalent to 85.2% of gross domestic product (GDP), which is higher than it was in 2017. Moreover, statistics from the ONS show gross domestic product recovered from the second quarter’s contraction to grow 0.3 per cent in the three months to August — only just enough for the UK to escape a technical recession.

The UK economy exists in a global context. A fair economy must also be fair to our global neighbours. In September 2019, according to the World Bank, there were 734.1 million people in developing countries who live on \$1.90 a day or less. This is less than in 2016, and so progress is being made. However, progress depends upon the generosity of the richer nations.

Questions

4.2.1 *Austerity is over. Spending and borrowing is set to rise in ways that, five years ago, were unimaginable. Is this fiscally responsible? Does it not undermine any gains from the 8 years of austerity?*

4.2.2 *Austerity imposed the greatest burden upon the poorest in our society. How will you prevent them being excluded from the promised spending spree?*

4.2.3 *The Northern Powerhouse has frequently been referred to by the major parties. How will you combat the suggestion that this is a cynical play for votes rather than a genuine commitment to the growth of the northern economy? How will you ensure that the Darlington economy benefits from this initiative?*

4.2.4 *Rebalancing the UK economy has and will require some difficult choices. Notwithstanding the debate about which department manages it, what stance will you take concerning the budget for foreign aid (currently 0.7% GDP)?*

4.2.5 *Poverty is calculated relative to the economy. That poverty exists in the UK is evidenced by the existence and normalization of food banks. What is your Party’s position on UK poverty and its solution?*

4.3 Employment

Christians see work not only through the lens of the economy, but also through the lens of human dignity. The meaningful and productive activity offered by employment precipitates fulfilment and a sense of worth; this directly contributes to happiness and wellbeing. Work then matters to people, yet for many the search for work is a fruitless one. Though it has fallen slightly since the last election (4.6%), unemployment, and particularly youth unemployment, in the region is higher than anywhere else in the country. Moreover, according to research from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) there are up to 3 million people missing from the headline unemployment rate because they report themselves as economically inactive. If “hidden” unemployment is factored in, the true unemployment rate should rise from 4.6% to 13.2% of the working-age population not in education.

Alongside a concern for employment, the Christian community also have concerns about workers’ rights, post-Brexit. All parties are saying that they will protect workers, but the majority of protections afforded to workers derive directly from EU directives – and these will no longer be binding.

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

Questions

4.3.1 *How will your party ensure the employment rights currently enjoyed in the UK are fully protected after the UK leaves the EU?*

4.3.2 *The North-east has the highest unemployment rate in the country and those in work are the poorest paid. How is this inequality to be addressed?*

4.3.3 *The introduction of Universal Credit was designed to encourage a work culture rather than a benefits culture. Has it been successful?*

4.4 *Peace and Security*

The main threats to national security are terrorism, espionage, cyber threats and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, many of which impact on the UK's national infrastructure. The current threat level is "substantial", which was set on 4 November 2019.

Many people are less concerned about the enemy without, but much more concerned about the enemy within. Brexit has divided the nation. There are considerable anxieties surrounding the Irish border question, and in particular, whether the process of leaving Europe will re-ignite the troubles and damage the Good Friday peace agreement. There is also an increasingly strident nationalist voice being heard from Scotland.

Questions

4.4.1 *Will the terrorist threat to the UK increase as a result of Brexit?*

4.4.2 *If Brexit re-ignites the Irish conflict, is that a price too high to pay?*

4.4.3 *What is your Party's commitment to defence in financial and moral terms?*

4.4.4 *How will your government answer the Trident question, and what is its stance on nuclear arms?*

4.5 *Caring for Planet Earth*

Since the last general election in 2017, large-scale demonstrations have grabbed the headlines and pushed climate and the environment up the list of voters' concerns. More than half of people say climate breakdown will affect how they vote in a general election.

Greta Thunberg sparked a global movement of youth climate activists fighting for their future. And Extinction Rebellion did the same for all generations. Our society must begin living within environmental limits, with a government

committed to making the transition to a sustainable economy that's fair for everyone.

Questions

4.5.1 *The UN's 2018 climate report said that we have until 2030 to keep temperature rises below 1.5C. So, 10 years to make the crucial changes needed to maintain a liveable planet and this Government will be in power for 5 of them. Targets are easy to set, but what will you do, both at a personal and in a public sense, to translate targets into radical and urgent action?*

4.5.2 *The UK signed up to the EU Renewable Energy Directive, which includes a UK target of 15% of energy from renewable sources (wind, wave, solar and biomass) by 2020. Commitments were also made to reduce greenhouse emissions by 80% by 2050. Now that we are leaving Europe, will these targets be abandoned?*

4.5.3 *Many people can't afford to heat their homes. We can't afford to ignore climate change either. Both the Labour and Conservative Manifesto commitments are towards creating carbon neutral living, with grants for infrastructure, etc., but how is the predicted increase in day to day running cost to be met by the poorest in our community?*

4.6 *The injustice of Homelessness*

Unlike many towns in the country, Darlington does not have high levels of street homelessness. This is because by working in partnership, the local authority and the voluntary sector have developed services for the homeless that are second to none. Facilities are available which mean that no one needs to sleep on the streets. However, 'hidden homelessness' (sofa-surfing, etc.) still exists, the demand for one bedroom accommodation still exceeds supply, and affordability of suitable accommodation remains an issue.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 came into force last year and imposes duties upon local authorities to prevent and relieve homelessness, regardless of whether individuals are 'intentionally homeless' or in priority need. This is positive, but only if the resources are there to fulfil the duty. The Government is very good at giving short term (headline grabbing) funding, but addressing homelessness must be a long term commitment.

Homelessness is not solved by house-building alone. Housing policy cannot be formed in a vacuum: it must fully acknowledge why people

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

become homeless. It may sound counterintuitive, but a person can be homeless even if they have a roof over their head.

Questions

4.6.1 *Darlington is one of the few places in the country with a zero count of rough sleepers and a strategic policy of No First Night Out. What will you do to ensure that early intervention and homelessness services are properly funded rather than sustained by ad hoc Government headline grabbing initiatives?*

4.6.2 *What is your attitude to individuals who beg in Darlington's Town Centre?*

4.6.3 *If a homeless individual presented at your surgery, what action would you take?*

4.7 Welcoming the stranger – Asylum and Immigration

Immigration policy was arguably the biggest issue driving the leave Europe campaign, with many Britons saying that they wanted to see a reduction in the number of EU migrants.

Britain is not as attractive to EU migrants as it was a couple of years ago. That may be because of Brexit-related political uncertainty, the falling value of the pound making UK wages less attractive, or simply the fact that job opportunities have improved in other EU countries.

The post-Brexit proposal is for an immigration system built around the skills that people can bring - not where they come from. It will be points based, closely tied to the UK's need.

Questions

4.7.1 *According to research, Britain is one of the worst destinations for people seeking asylum in Western Europe. Britain takes fewer refugees, offers less generous financial support (about £5.50 a day), provides housing that is often substandard, does not give asylum seekers the right to work, has been known to punish those who volunteer, and routinely forces people into destitution and even homelessness when they are not granted refugee status due to bureaucratic delays. The delays extend far beyond the government's 6 month target, which is why it was recently abandoned. What can be changed to avoid deepening the pain of individuals who are already traumatised by the journey to Britain?*

4.7.2 *It is estimated that there are somewhere between 300,000 and a million illegal immigrants in the UK. What is your Party's policy in relation to these individuals?*

4.8 Religious Faith in Public Life

Darlington has an increasingly diverse cultural and religious mix within its population. Initiatives locally have sought to bring faith communities together at a point in history where allegiance to faith community is frequently used as a rallying cry. Islamic fundamentalism, religiously inspired terrorism, and the dark side of religious extremism has often overshadowed the positive, and led to a mistrust of the faith communities in general. We believe that all faith communities have a part to play in building social capital and community cohesion. They are also, frequently, at the forefront in speaking up for the most vulnerable in society.

Questions

4.8.1 *Do you have established relationships with Darlington's faith communities (not just Christian)? If not, how do you start to engage with them?*

4.8.2 *How can the insights that faith traditions have about the privilege and responsibility of living in community be shared and developed for the common good?*

4.9 Criminal Justice

The issue of crime has jumped to become the third most important issue to voters. Indeed, there has been a dramatic increase in the significance of crime to the public. In early May 2017, just 11% considered it one of the most important issues facing the country, but now over one in four (28%)

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

believe it is one of the most pressing issues facing the country.

We celebrate the fact that the Durham and Darlington Constabulary is rated as excellent nationally, and that it so often leads the way in initiatives that are rolled out across the country (e.g. community service, restorative justice). We celebrate the multi-agency involvement encouraged by the Crime and Victim Commissioner.

The sentencing of offenders still concerns us; we believe that a sentence of 20 years should mean 20 years, and that a commute of sentence to 50% should be genuinely earned. We remain concerned about the number of vulnerable people who end up in prison because there is nowhere else for them.

We believe that a greater emphasis should be placed on restorative justice and on well managed community sentencing.

We believe that more resources should be directed towards prisoner aftercare – following release it is too easy to slip back into the behaviour that leads to imprisonment because of poorly prepared rehabilitation pathways – so addicts return to drugs, alcoholics to drink, and so on.

Questions

4.9.1 *The recent government commitment to increase the number of police in the country has the potential to bring approximately 200 more officers into Durham and Darlington. When so much crime is of a technical nature (e.g. on-line, cyber), is increasing officers on the beat putting the resource in the right place?*

4.9.2 *For many, prison is a revolving door because the resources for resettlement and re-integration are lacking. Will your party invest to rehabilitate the person and save the cost of reimprisonment?*

4.9.3 *'County Lines' - when drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns, often using violence to drive out local dealers and exploiting children and vulnerable people to sell drugs – is reaching epidemic proportions. It is driven by money. Would a change in drug laws be a game changer?*

4.9.4 *Public confidence in the justice system is undermined by sentences that do not reflect the severity of the crime or the actual time to be spent in prison. How can confidence be restored?*

4.10 The gap between rich and poor

We believe that all individuals are of equal worth before God. However, the vast gap between the rich and poor contradicts this belief. Just eight people own the same wealth as the poorest half of the world; these individuals are sitting on more financial assets than 3.6 billion people put together. While the number of people living in extreme poverty has decreased in recent decades, 700 million more people could have escaped poverty if action had been taken to reduce the gap between rich and poor.

Global inequality, though not to such an obscene level, has a counterpart in the UK, where the gap between rich and poor is now greater than at any time over the last 40 years. Indeed, the UK is now regarded as one of the most unequal countries outside the developing world. Surveys suggest 82% of the UK public are concerned about this, and 69% think it is an issue the government should, in some way, address.

Economic inequality affects social fabric, weakens social bonds and damages the common good. Research has shown it has an impact upon happiness, human well-being, life expectancy, educational performance, citizenship and community, social mobility, law and order, religious and racial harmony and relationships. As a result, all of us are affected, yet the most effective too for combatting inequality, the tax system, actually reinforces it by placing the heaviest burden on the poorest.

35% of Darlington's children are living in poverty. Many ordinary people struggle to make ends meet and to pay for basic necessities like food, energy and housing. The cost of living has risen, but wages for the poorest section of the community have not kept pace.

Questions

4.10.1 *In your opinion, what is the route to building a more equitable society? Has taxation a role to play?*

4.10.2 *It has been argued that work is the route out of poverty, but only if work pays. Will you commit to making the minimum wage a living wage?*

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

4.10.3 *A child living in poverty judges the society that allows it. The fact that 35% of children in Darlington are living in poverty is a cause for shame. What will you do to ensure that a childhood in economic poverty does not translate into adult poverty?*

4.11 *Life and Death*

Earlier this year, Ron Hogg, Durham's Police, Crime and Victims Commissioner was diagnosed with MND. He is calling for a change in the law around assisted dying. As Christians, we have a deep convictions about the sanctity of life, but are divided on this emotive issue.

Questions

4.11.1 *What is your view of an individual with a terminal disease possessing the legal right to end their own life? How would you seek to make your view a representative rather than a personal one? Should the law be changed?*

4.12 *Social Care*

The crisis in social care has been well documented. The crisis is both a crisis of finance, structure and care quality, three areas which are intimately linked; a good quality service is only possible where there are the resources and the structure to deliver it.

A lot of pre-election words have been spoken about funding, but there are structural questions still unaddressed, such as the real lack of detail on funding social care properly – an issue which is currently crippling the NHS. Labour have pledged free personal care modelled on Scotland, but even there it isn't free but merely subsidised, with some users still facing significant costs. Funding an adequate offer in England, as well as the state covering catastrophic costs for the most needy, would total somewhere in the region of £15bn by 2023/24.

Questions

4.12.1 *How does your Party envisage funding social care in a sustainable way for the future?*

4.12.2 *What measures can be taken locally and through legislation to improve the quality of care in the sector? Is it simply down to higher staffing levels and better training, or are there other factor to take account of?*

4.12.3 *Will your government commit to funding research into the costly ailments of an increasing elderly population (e.g. dementia) as a way of preventing/reducing social care needs?*

4.13 *Health and Well-being*

After Brexit, the Health Service is one of the main issues occupying the mind of the electorate. We accept that health needs will always outstrip resources available to meet them, but money is not always the answer. In spite of austerity, the NHS wastes high levels of resource, it is poorly administered, and is structurally cumbersome and slow to adapt. Nevertheless, we want a government that is committed to the values that make the NHS what it is, and want to see healthcare properly and equitably funded (no postcode lottery).

We are particularly concerned about mental health services. In 2018 the Government carried out a review of the Mental Health Act which made recommendations that would lead to a more equitable and less discriminatory way of working with the nation's mental health needs. It is estimated that mental health issues will affect 2 out of 3 people over the course of their lifetime, and yet only 6% of health spending goes into mental health services, and very little into research.

Questions

4.13.1 *About 7% of health spending currently goes to private companies. What assurances will your Party give that privatisation will not compromise the 'free at the point of need' ethos of the NHS?*

4.13.2 *Post Brexit, will the NHS be "up for sale" in trade talks, particularly with the US?*

4.13.3 *Demands on the health service will always outstrip the capacity to supply. What will your government do to ensure that mental health is funded properly?*

4.13.4 *The public have been lied to before about spending on the NHS. What can you say to reassure the electorate that the current statements relating to health spending are real, and not just electoral propaganda?*

4.13.5 *Some estimate that only about 20% of the impact on our health is down to health care, the rest is down to wider factors such as family, education, employment and housing. How could the NHS develop a more holistic model of care?*

4.14 *Equality and Diversity*

Christians believe that all human beings are equal under God and all should be respected as such. We fully support the laws that protect against discrimination and which promote equality on all

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

nine grounds described by the Equalities Act 2010. We acknowledge that we have failed in some of these areas in the past, and that the legacy of that remains with us. In some areas we are still failing.

We want a community in Darlington where the rights and intrinsic worth of every person is protected.

Questions

4.14.1 *With which minority groups in Darlington have you actively engaged? (Darlington is often referred to as the Traveller capital of the North).*

4.14.2 *The Christian church is rooted in Judaism. It is easy to denounce anti-Semitism in words, but what action will you take to protect the rights and dignity of Jewish people?*

4.14.3 *Has the Brexit debate increased racial tension in Darlington?*

4.15 *Education and Young People*

Education is always a divisive issue at election time, for no other reason than that it relates to the life chances of the nation's youth. There is need for investment at every level of the education system, from pre-school to university.

Questions

4.15.1 *Figures from the Department of Education put the North East at the bottom of the class in term of educational achievement. What can be done to improve this situation?*

4.15.2 *Head-teachers are asking parents to contribute to the costs of not just the extras, but the essentials. How are schools to be adequately funded? What is your party commitment?*

4.15.3 *With 35% of Darlington's children living in poverty, and with such children estimated to be over a year and a half behind more advantaged peers in their development by age 5, how can the school readiness gap be closed?*

4.15.4 *What is your Party's position on tuition fees?*

4.15.5 *What is your Party's position regarding Ofsted?*

4.16 *The Voluntary Sector*

By their very nature, faith communities are part of the diverse and active voluntary and community or 'third sector' in Darlington. The crucial contribution to local communities made by the sector has been recognised by both central and local government, and (perhaps out of necessity)

the sector is seen as having a central role to play in delivering services within Health, Policing, and Social Care. However, strategic decision-making often excludes the sector, and assumptions are made about its capacity and ability to deliver that are not matched by a commitment to properly resourcing it.

4.16.1 *What is your understanding of the voluntary and community sector in Darlington? Are you involved in it? Do you volunteer?*

4.16.2 *It is estimated that the voluntary and community sector nationally spend £1.1bn on gaining funds. This is money that could be used pursuing charitable aims. What action can you take to ensure a strong and properly resourced third sector both nationally and in Darlington?*

4.16.3 *Should government encourage Local Authorities to add a percentage charge or levy to the domestic rates to support the local voluntary sector?*

5 *What we expect of our political representative ...*

No MP is perfect. Whoever is elected will have strengths and weaknesses. We believe it is important that the person elected possesses the humility to accept the truth of this statement. For some, politics is a calling, for others a career choice. Whoever represents us, we are seeking:

A person of integrity: We expect the highest levels of personal and public integrity and would want to reserve the right to recall an elected member who is shown to have committed a misdemeanour that brings either Parliament or Darlington into disrepute.

A servant of the electorate: An MP has a duty to represent the whole constituency, including those who hold different views. We want an MP who genuinely represents Darlington, and who is truly accountable to the people of Darlington.

A person of principle not party: Adversarial politics tends to prioritise party over principle and paint the world in black and white. We applaud proper debate as a sign of a healthy democracy. We want an MP who is prepared to stand up to the whips if mandated to do so by either conscience or constituency.

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

An independent thinker who is prepared to challenge and offer genuine representation: Wise MPs recognise that the answer to pressing national questions could lie within their constituency. We are seeking an MP who is prepared to be shaped by local consultation, debate and dialogue.

A person rooted in Darlington, accessible and in touch with its people: We believe that elected members should be rooted in the local community, be based locally, mix with local people and use local services. We believe that our representative should be accessible to the whole town and should create opportunities to listen to and to understand the needs of the community from within.

Questions

5.1.1 Why do you want to be MP for Darlington?

5.1.2 What is your connection to Darlington? If you were elected and are not already resident, how would you root yourself in this community?

5.1.3 Serving as an MP there will be occasions on which you will make decisions that are complex and contentious. Has there been an occasion in the past when you have had to make a stand and defend an unpopular decision? From where have you derived strength?

5.1.4 The character of the leader of a political party usually shapes the character of the party as a whole. How do you view the leader of your party?

6 Conclusion

We would ask each candidate who will be seeking to represent Darlington in Parliament to consider the questions raised in this document and to present a written response. We will make copies of these responses available within our churches and the wider community through the use of our website, and then, on 2nd December at 7.00pm at Northgate URC, DL1 1QU on North Road, there will be a public meeting to allow candidates a further opportunity to express their views and to take questions.

We recognise that the work of the politician today is no easy task. We promise our prayerful support but we also would remind all candidates and the duly elected member that we are committed to working for the common good in the months before and in the years after the General Election. We hope and pray that if you are elected you will work alongside the people of Darlington for the creation of a community in which all have a dignified share and which we will all be confident to pass on to those who come after us.

The Common Good: Uniting a Divided Nation *Churches Together in Darlington*

7 *References and acknowledgements*

"Towards the Common Good in Darlington", 1997: an election document produced by the Churches.

"Passion for the Common Good in Darlington", 2001: an election document produced by the Churches.

"Grounding the Common Good in Darlington", 2005: an election document produced by the Churches.

"Integrity and Purpose: The Common Good in Darlington", 2010: an election document produced by the Churches.

"Regaining The Common Good in Darlington", 2015: an election document produced by the Churches.

"The Common Good at the Centre in Darlington", 2017: an election document produced by the Churches.

"The Common Good" 1996: The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.