

Name of Constituency	Rochester and Strood CCA
Name of CPF Group	Rochester and Strood Policy Forum
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Number of attendees	21
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Question a How should Conservatives ensure that people have the skills to ensure they are ready for a technology-driven jobs market?

Our group largely agreed that the key to future-proofing jobs begins in our schools with education improvements including a focus on technical education. This should include an emphasis on IT and coding so that our children can compete on a global level with those in Countries such as China and Japan.

There should be a push to reintroduce careers advice services in all schools, which would work with local employers in key industries such as sciences and engineering etc. The aim of this being to provide meaningful and expansive work experience to all young people. Perhaps this could be part of the curriculum? We considered encouraging retired/semi-retired professionals taking up roles in schools and colleges to advise young people on career paths, personal development and how to be competitive in the work environment, all in all to stimulate practical skills needed for the 21st century.

We felt that the government should continue to push the apprenticeship and training programmes, although there was support for the idea that apprenticeships should be open to all young people, and not dependent on the grades they achieve. Such a policy singles out those not academically inclined and could be detrimental to future job security and skills.

Whilst our group supported the government's commitment to encouraging more people currently out work to get a job, we also felt there could be better support for people with disabilities to become entrepreneurs. A couple of former professionals felt that there should be greater help and support for those in high-technical jobs, such as the medical and other professions that require substantial retraining or accreditation each year.

On the other hand, a question was raised over the efficiency of over-training professionals, i.e. do we need to encourage professionals such as nurses and the police to complete a degree before embarking on their career, or could this be realigned to focus on personal development? Also for those professions which are regulated but not under the control of the government, could a tax incentive for employers be introduced to encourage the markets to train and up skill their staff?

A final thought was to combine local job and adult education centres. This could allow local authorities to provide courses to those seeking work in a targeted manner, which in turn could contribute to a 'plug' in the skills gap of a local economy.

Question b The Party champions home ownership and also recognises shifts in preferences for differing tenures such as shared equity and renting. How might Conservatives do more to meet differing home ownership aspirations and needs?

In our group, there were mixed feelings as to whether to maintain or scrap the shared ownership scheme. Some members wanted to maintain the scheme and expand it, whereas others thought it to be a waste of money for the buyer due to the sometimes high rent paid on top of the mortgage.

There was a consensus amongst members that favoured increasing the supply of council-owned houses on a significant scale, such that the increased supply should be enough to meet future demand for housing, and perhaps extinguish some of the need for couples to buy into the housing stock. There were also a number of people advocating a moratorium on the Right to Buy until more houses could be built to cover some of the local housing demands. Whilst this runs counter to Conservative principles, it could however provide a platform for a new type of tenure.

One suggestion was that local council and housing association building stock should be developed with the aim of maximum or fixed tenures to prevent poorer localities becoming somewhat segregated on their estates from the rest of society. This was a problem under the last Labour government. This could encourage them to move on and find something else, such as other rentals or home ownership. Having a maximum or fixed tenure was not a popular suggestion as one member pointed out that it did nothing for those who cannot afford to buy a home. It could also be seen to be contrary to the Prime Minister's vision of everybody having a stake in our country.

Therefore a development of maximum/fixed tenures could provide local authority or housing association starter-homes based on renting and saving for a deposit. This could be called something like a 'Rental Savings Deposit Scheme'. This proposal could involve tenants of these properties being able to opt-in to a government backed scheme involving the tenant paying an additional (and manageable) premium on their rent. At the end of the maximum/fixed tenure they would be able to draw down those premiums to use as a deposit on a house - the government could perhaps add an additional bonus which would be an incentive and be a 'hand-up' rather than a 'hand-out'.

Another suggestion was the return of MIRAS, which was a Conservative idea first introduced in 1983 that allowed borrowers tax relief on mortgage lending interest payments. The 1983 Budget raised the tax allowance from £25,000 to £30,000. Unmarried couples with joint mortgages could pool their allowances to £60,000. This provision remained in place until the 1988 Budget. MIRAS was completely abolished in April 2000 by the Labour Government, who argued it had become a middle class perk.

At the moment, interest rates are artificially low, because of the global desire to stimulate demand. However it is expected that long term mortgage rates will move upwards from the current 1% to 3% to a long term average of about 7%. In these circumstances, MIRAS based on say, (£50,000) per adult or £100,000 per couple will be a significant help in making mortgages more affordable in the long-term.

There was strong support amongst the group for preferred use of independent builders rather than large builders who participate in land-banking. Indeed there was also support that land-banking should be banned so that developers cannot pick and choose when to develop the land for maximum profit.

In addition, a suggestion put forward was to place pressure on construction companies to produce houses at a fraction of the current cost, by using prefabricated modern construction based on the use of efficient green materials, which are heat and environmentally efficient. These properties should meet the needs of the 21st century with some 3-4 story multiple housing units, separated by lush green spaces, which as are becoming more widely used in places such as Lambeth, Lewisham and Peckham in South East London.

Question c What are the limits to assisted places schemes? What else might Conservatives do to promote consistency in excellence?

Given this is not currently policy, many members of the group were unaware what assisted places were until one member explained what it used to be before the Labour government of 1997 abolished the scheme. The main concern of all participant groups was the cost involved v. the number of students able to benefit from such a scheme. If the scheme were used for underperforming students then level of parental involvement and support would be a potential problem.

The group largely, if not unanimously, supported the government's policy of grammar schools. Medway constituencies have a number of grammar schools. To improve the general consistency of excellence, one suggestion was compulsory extended hours at school with a focus on skills and educational attainment - perhaps using retired/semi-retired professionals (either voluntary or paid expenses) to supervise and teach skills in the extended hours after school's standard hours.

Question d What measures should Conservatives take to ensure value for money in the weekly grocery shop? What further responsibility do Conservatives have for regulating the market so as to limit the negative health impact and higher costs to the NHS resulting from the consumption of food that is high in added sugar, salt and saturated and trans fats?

The answers to these questions have been split into two parts;

a) There was some surprising data showing the level of avoidable food and drink waste (around 14%) of the average weekly shop. It was felt that one measure could be to scrap some 'Use By' and 'Best Before' dates, as many people are over-cautious and throw perfectly good food away when it reaches these dates.

We thought that value for money might be improved by growing or producing more food in UK, as we have the technology to produce crops all year round in places such as Thanet Earth, Kent. This would reduce time and transport costs. There should also be tax incentives for farmers to produce food in the way that Thanet Earth does, as not only does it produce healthy food, but also renewable electricity for the National Grid - thus contributing to a reduction in energy costs too.

Amidst what was described as a price war, value for money could also be improved by introducing incentives for supermarkets to have a "Fair for Consumers" scheme - similar to other accolades that they aim to achieve such as promoting Fairtrade, or fair prices for farmers on items such as milk. Whichever format this scheme took, such as an award or charter, it should aim to encourage shops and supermarkets to provide a fair deal in value and quality on healthy foods for consumers.

b) Most participants agreed that education in schools is pertinent to limiting the negative health impact by teaching people how to make healthy choices when purchasing their weekly shop. The reintroduction of food-tech classes in all schools would be a start, thus providing a platform for students to learn how to cook a healthy meal for less money.

Many participants expressed a concern in forcing the markets to either lower sugar, salt or fat content or increase prices, as there is a belief that manufacturers would simply replace the ingredient with something detrimental to health. There was a general consensus that all foods, including those high in sugar, salt or fat are not a problem per se when consumed in moderation. The group would rather consider ending or limiting buy one get one free (BOGOF) deals on unhealthy food and encouraging markets to place BOGOF deals on healthier foods instead.

Question e How might Conservatives use technology to empower consumers further? What might we do to help use the power of technology (such as smart meters and automatic tariff switching) to help families get the best out of often complex markets?

Leading on from the fourth question, one thought was to encourage shoppers to 'shop around' by the use of price comparison sites and digital technologies such as apps. This allows them to look at their shop as a whole whilst comparing the cost across a large range of supermarkets.

There was support for new houses to have integrated smart technologies so that people can have control over their home like never before. This should include the use of smart panels and Smartphone apps to empower consumers with the ability to monitor and control the cost of every aspect of their home, including internal and external lighting and heating etc.

Question f What mechanisms should Conservatives introduce to help people get the most from their money and to encourage a more widespread savings culture?

One suggestion was a ban on credit cards or store cards for those on the lowest disposable incomes, or at least restrict the number of credit cards and total debt available to them as a percent of disposable income.

There is support for the Families with Children and Young People in Debt (Respite) Bill, which was put forward by Rochester and Strood MP, Kelly Tolhurst. Something our constituency would undoubtedly like to pass into statute to help those 'just about managing' families.

One other area of concern was student loans. Student loans can cast a large shadow over a recent graduate from a poorer background as well as for those unable to achieve a higher than average paying job after graduation. It was suggested that there should be a cap on the interest payable on students loans to an amount no more than minimum repayment each month. This would mean that someone paying £50.00 per month as a loan repayment, would have their interest capped at £50.00 per month, which would prevent an ever-increasing debt for those on low incomes and who are trying, but unable to pay more than that minimum payment.

Question g How should Conservative policy locally and nationally be influenced by the cost of living challenges that are particular to your area?

The objective of conservative policy must be that national and local policies are aimed at developing local suppliers of goods and services and promoting self reliance and self supply wherever possible. This has the main advantages of reducing reliance on overseas imports, reducing our balance of trade deficits and promoting more local employment.

Therefore, local and national strategies must encourage UK producers of goods and services with better/ lower rates of local and general taxation than those businesses which import from abroad to resell in the UK. National Government must recognise this wherever possible, bearing in mind EU competition policy and any other international restraints which govern the limits of help which UK government can provide.

In Rochester and Strood part of the underlying economy is based on agriculture. Local farmers should be given incentives to supply much more of the food products which we consume locally and nationally. Easy terms of finance should be available for farmers seeking to expand production, based on the most modern and cost effective methods of production - such as those used by Thanet Earth (see Q4).

BAE Systems maintains a unit in Rochester next to the Rochester Airport. The government should be looking what can be done to improve the adjoining Rochester Airport as a means to encouraging BAE systems to locate some of its testing facilities there. There should also be a greater encouragement for BAE to make use of the research that can be provided by our university campuses in Medway and Kent. Ultimately we should be seeking to harness skills from our local universities where we can, so as to make our industries more competitive, improve income generation and reduce the cost of living for our communities.

Other Comments (if any)

N/A

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