

**Mayoral Area:** West Midlands

**Party:** Liberal Democrats

**Candidate name:** Jenny Wilkinson

**Twitter:** @JennyWLibDem

**1. *If elected, how will you champion social workers in your area?***

Social work is vital to providing the necessary support and protection to all those in the West Midlands. Despite it being vital, it has not had the attention it deserves from elected politicians. I will set up regular ways of communicating with social work leaders and frontline social workers so they can let me know about the issues that need tackling related to their services and work. I will advocate on behalf of these issues in the media and at a local government level. We cannot improve our area or our society without championing the work that social workers do.

**2. *Directly elected Mayors can use their position to effectively champion national issues on behalf of their constituents. If elected, will you use your influence to raise issues relating to social work with national Government?***

Absolutely. The issues that the social work profession and social workers seek to address are the same issues that I am deeply concerned about: human rights, the importance of relationships, ethical use of power, inequality, poverty, and injustice. For too long we have had people in positions of power who are poverty-deniers, creating policies that do not recognise the issues of poverty, deprivation, and inequality. Social workers seek to address the issues related to these on a daily basis.

Research in our area by Professor Paul Bywaters, when he was at Coventry University, has shown just how key these are to how and when social workers intervene. These issues need to be put front and centre of any discussions around social policy and services for those in need of support and protection. I will promote these values and issues as key to ensuring that the West Midlands is an inclusive, welcoming, supportive, and safe place to live.

Additionally, social workers have also been hugely affected by the reorganisation of state services that has meant they have less time to do the work due to increased administrative burdens. We cannot talk about improving social work services without talking about changing the system that puts pressure and demands on all social services to deal with ever mounting administration.

**3. *If elected, will you (when suitable) make representations for the investment in social work recruitment, education, and retention initiatives?***

Absolutely. We have some excellent social work education programmes in the region and these need to be supported to continue to produce newly qualified social workers that will want to work in the area. I will advocate to: continue the bursaries for trainee social workers to qualify, so they can attend University; support the local West Midlands Teaching Partnership to link the Universities with the local authorities; and advocate for the continued funding for the West Midlands Step Up to Social Work programme. We also have some excellent social work services and great leaders in the region, but many feel they have been hampered by a national system of policies that do not address the main issues that drive

demand for those services, such as poverty and deprivation, and huge cuts to service budgets meaning they have less capacity to meet that demand. Retention is a huge issue in social work - and many other public services - as a result. We can only address these issues by championing the values of social work and developing policies that recognise the importance of tackling poverty, deprivation and inequality. We have all the ingredients for a strong, stable, high quality local workforce, but we do not have the context to ensure that is the case consistently over time in the region. I will seek to create that context by working with the profession.

**4. *If elected, will you promote equality and diversity in your area?***

Yes, our local communities, our country and the world depend on it. We need to ensure that we are actively promoting and supporting equality and diversity so all views and voices are heard and understood. This means ensuring everyone understands the importance of this so no one is unfairly disadvantaged and has the same opportunities. We need to ensure that equality and diversity embedded into all decision-making powers and systems. I will address this by ensuring comprehensive equality impact assessments are undertaken for all substantial decisions, actively working to improve diverse representation in our elected and non-elected public bodies and establishing listening forums to ensure that diverse voices are heard on issues that impact their lives.

**5. *If elected, will you seek to tackle poverty and the causes of poverty in your area?***

Absolutely. One of my core priorities is to tackle poverty across the West Midlands. In particular, I believe that we need to tackle the housing crisis through an extensive house-building programme, including a significant increase in housing for social rent, and I also want to promote the Real Living Wage and trials of Universal Basic Income, as means of ensuring a basic, unconditional income for everyone.

**6. *If elected, will you seek to tackle homelessness and the causes of homelessness in your area?***

Yes. Homelessness is a sign of a failure at the level of policy, not specific individuals. With the right help and support, provided with the right policies that recognise the structural and systemic issues that cause homelessness, we can ensure we do not have homelessness in our region. An integrated approach is needed to tackle the underlying causes of homelessness.

**7. *Please write no more than 300 words on what you would like our members to know about your candidacy.***

I am proud of our diverse and dynamic communities across the West Midlands. But decades of neglect by successive central governments and councils, held back by ideology or lack of money, have meant we have not got to grips with problems in community engagement, connection, inequality, discrimination and increased alienation - all key components in crime and anti-social behaviour.

Too many people in the West Midlands suffer from poverty, loneliness and inequality. Benefit cuts, increased use of foodbanks, and closure of community facilities all require immediate intervention. No-one should be left with insufficient income to feed, clothe, and house themselves to an adequate standard. The situation is completely unacceptable in one of the richest countries in the world in 2021 and I am committed to eliminating poverty and inequality in the West Midlands.

Of course, recovering from the wide-ranging effects of Covid is key. The pandemic has had a huge impact across the West Midlands in terms of health, mental health and the economy. Particularly troubling has been the light the pandemic has shone on the huge inequalities across the region, with poorer households, people of colour and the disabled being far more significantly impacted than more affluent groups. So it's hugely important to focus on how we can come out of these difficult times to build a stronger and fairer community across our region.

I see Universal Basic Income as a key means of tackling poverty, and UBI trials are a priority for me, alongside implementing a Real Living Wage. As regards the housing crisis, this can only be resolved by building many more genuinely affordable homes to buy or part-buy and, especially, for social rent. As Mayor, I would oversee a substantial building programme to ensure that everybody across the West Midlands has a safe and secure home.