

For Labour, England and St George



**a guide for Labour activists
by the English Labour Network**

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Introduction

To form a government, Labour needs to win England, and Labour needs to win more votes from people who have a strong sense of English identity. We need to demonstrate the strong links between building a better society for the people of England and Labour's radical policies 'for the many, not the few'.

In the process, we can strengthen a progressive, inclusive English identity and help to marginalise the far-right groups who want to appeal to a racist and xenophobic Englishness.

Labour is proposing four new national bank holidays, including a St George's Day bank holiday. Party activists will want to promote this popular policy and take a leading part in St George's Day celebrations.

We know that not all activists are familiar with or instinctively comfortable with English identity or the patriotism expressed by many voters. This briefing explains why national identity is important and why the left has much to gain and nothing to lose from progressive patriotism. It suggests some topics for discussion in party meetings and practical suggestions on ways of engaging with English identity, including the celebration of St George's Day, in ways that reflect Labour's principled progressive values.

The English Labour Network has published this as a *draft for consultation*. We'd really value feedback from across the party on ways of improving the guide for future years. We'd also value local examples of good practice.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Denham', with a stylized flourish at the end.

John Denham
Director, English Labour Network

For the many not the few: why national identity should matter to the left

Building a majority for progressive change

To build a society 'for the many not the few' it is not enough for a lot of people to feel that they are losing out while others are enjoying the perks. It's too easy to turn that resentment against others (including migrants, disabled people, claimants – anyone who is different).

Labour's support needs to be built on a strong sense of *shared* identity, *common* interests and a determination to *work together* to build a better society. National identity is not the only source of shared identity, but it is one that is important to many voters.

Identity politics is not new. Voters have always looked for parties and candidates who will 'stand up for people like me'. This was and is often more important than the detailed policies or ideology of the political party. This is a particular challenge for the left. The old working-class identity - based on large workplaces, high levels of trade union membership, and tightly knit communities - that generated loyal support for a mass working class party is much weaker than it used to be. The working class hasn't gone away but the deep collective sense of identity with Labour is much weaker.

In an insecure, uncertain world people still want a sense of shared identity. Often, people are turning to identities based on the place they live and the nation they belong to. In a very unequal society where many feel they don't have a voice and are not listened to it can be a powerful voice for change. The sense of national identity is often strongest amongst people who feel they are doing less well in a fast-changing world: they are people Labour should not only aim to represent but to help transform their lives and opportunities.

Tackling the populist right

Across Europe, the populist right has been much more effective at tapping into this politics of people, nation and place. But, of course, right populism has actively promoted a divisive politics that is often xenophobic and racist. Unfortunately, the left has often made things too easy for the populist right by failing to respect national identity, or by labelling anyone who feels proud of their nation as automatically racist.

By engaging positively with English identity, Labour can help to marginalise the populist and far rights groups and parties who want to promote division and hatred

Reaching across a divided nation

England is a divided nation: divided by wealth and income, by regions, cities towns and countries, by the differing views and values of different generations, of cosmopolitan liberals and of communitarians, by social class, race and faith. Yet the majority share a common interest in building an economy and a society that work for the common good: not just for a few people, a few places or a few interests.

Be respecting and engaging the national identities of the people of England we can help bridge those divisions so that our common interests are clearly expressed

English, British and local identities

For the foreseeable future, most English residents are likely to say they are English **and** British. They are also likely to have a strong identity with the place they live.

Labour needs to respect **all** these identities (as well as identities of faith and race). At present, Labour too often simply fails to talk about or respect England or English identity, even when we talk about Britain, faith, race or the place we live.

Respecting English identity does not mean promoting English nationalism. There is very little real 'English nationalism'. Few people say 'England for the English' or want English independence. Debates for and against an English parliament are primarily about how democracy should work for all the people who live in England, not just the people who feel English.

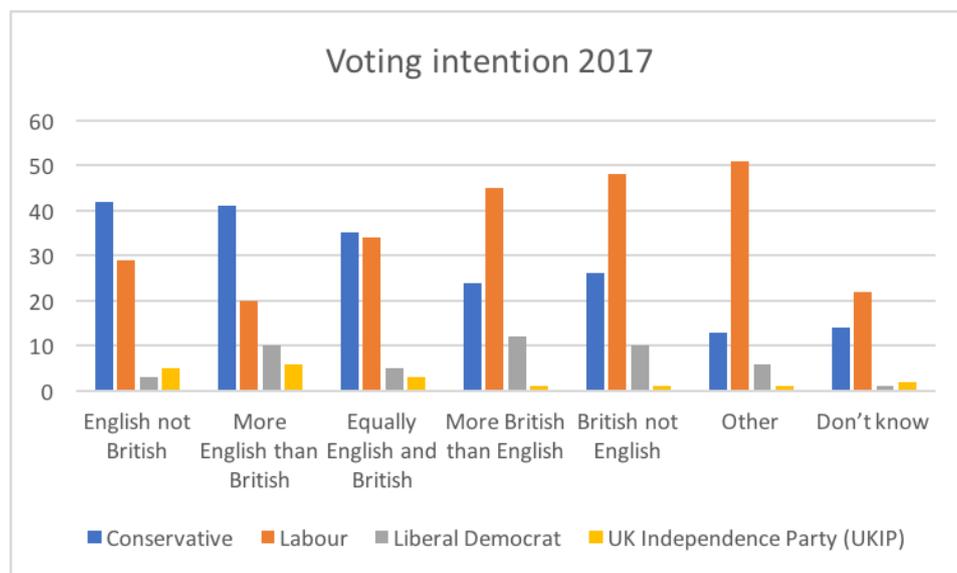
Most people who identify as English just don't want to be ignored. They want to know that Labour respects their identity. They want to know that Labour will stand up for people like them. This means making sure we don't forget English identity or ignore people who feel English. It does **not** mean that we should assume everyone is (or ought to) be English.

Identity matters when people vote

English and British identifiers have started to vote differently

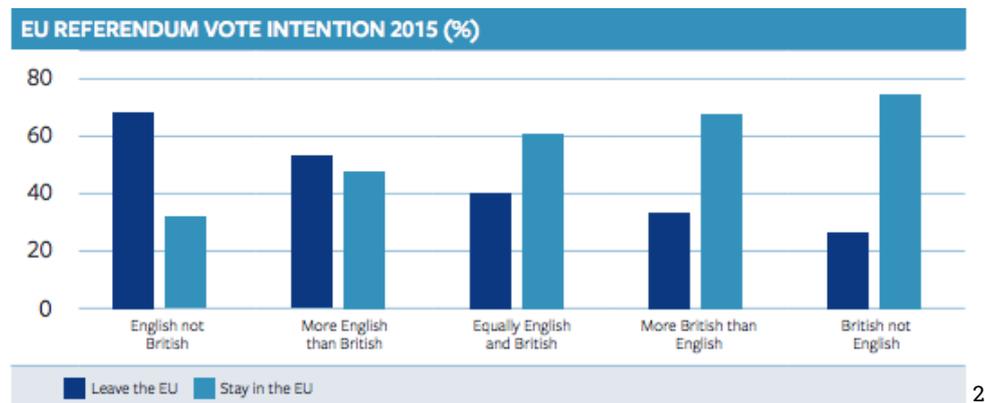
In the 2017 election, the Conservatives beat Labour amongst 'more English' and 'equally English and British' identifying voters. Labour won amongst the more British. If Labour had done as well amongst English identifiers we might be in power now.

These differences are relatively new. In 2001, the last time Labour won the popular vote in England, there was little variation in voting pattern by national identity.



¹ YouGov

In the EU referendum, over 70% of people who felt 'only English' voted for Brexit. A similar proportion of 'only British' people voted Remain. It is English identifiers in England who are taking the UK out of the EU.



Although we may not fully understand the reasons for these differences, it is clear that Labour needs to win greater support from amongst those who feel more strongly English.

Most of Labour's target seats are 'more English'

In 2017, Labour did particularly well in metropolitan, city and university constituencies, but did less well, even losing support, in many smaller towns with older voters who have spent less time in education. In these predominantly working-class communities the number of people feeling 'more English than British' is likely to be significantly higher than those feeling 'more British than English'.

At the next election, most of the English seats that Labour needs to win (and some of the key marginals we need to defend) are in smaller towns, often with a good number of rural communities.³

² Lord Ashcroft polls

³ Centre for English Identity and Politics/Baston

Key facts about Labour, England and Englishness

If we are honest, some Labour activists are uncertain about celebrating St George's Day or reflecting English identity in their campaigning. There may be misplaced fears that this will appeal to, or even strengthen, far right extremists. (In fact, it's an important way of countering the populist right).

Others worry about crossing a line between caring about our country and appealing to a xenophobic nationalism. Sometimes people with progressive liberal views who equate national identity with racism are actually a big obstacle to strengthening a progressive, inclusive, English identity.

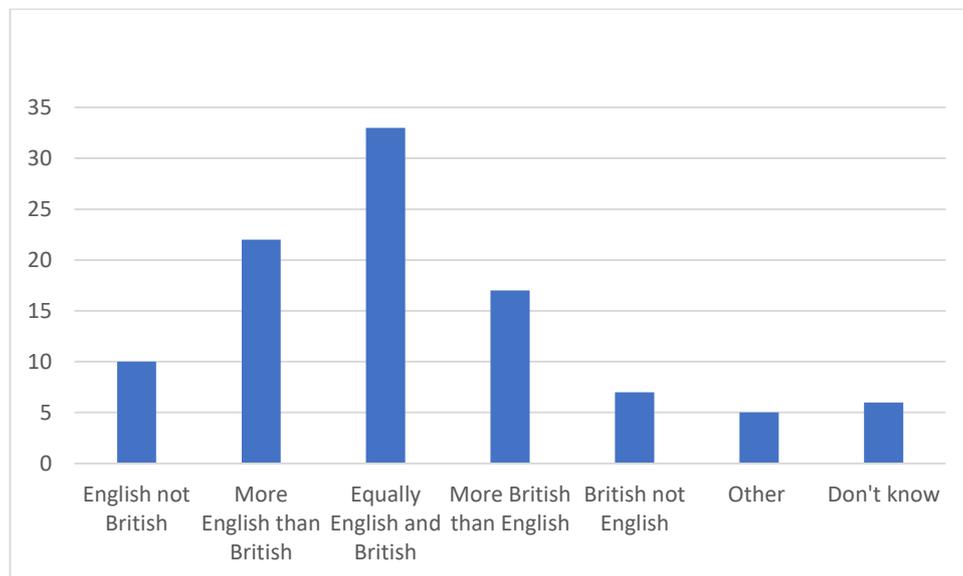
The key facts below, and possible discussion points for Labour meetings, should reassure activists that there is no contradiction between Labour values and respecting English identity in our campaigning or in celebrating St George's Day. If we do, we will not just gain more votes for Labour; we can help to marginalise dangerous and offensive views of Englishness.

We don't hide from some difficult issues raised by some of the people who identify as 'English', particularly around race and immigration. But we argue that this makes it all the more important that Labour engages positively with English identity.

English is the most widely shared national identity in England

English is not a minority identity. (It is often assumed in the media and politics that most people are British and that only a few people are English)

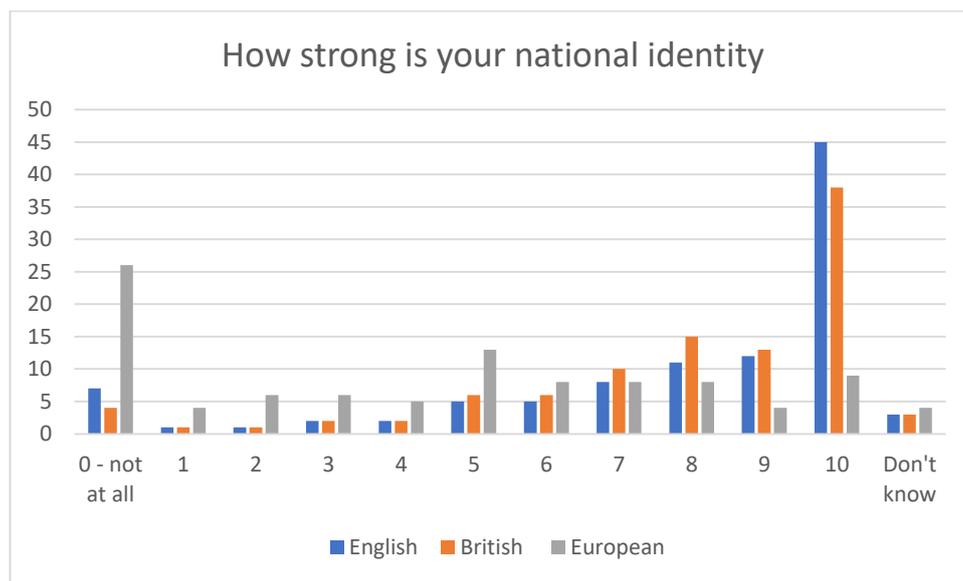
Nearly 90% of English residents say they are English to some degree. 80% say they are British. Most say they are English and British. If forced to choose one or the other, surveys usually show that English and British are each chosen by roughly half the population



Englishness is felt even more intensely than Britishness

Half the population of England not only say they are English; they say they feel it intensely English (50% are 9 or 10 on a scale of 0-10). Britishness is also felt strongly though by slightly fewer people at the most intense levels but by fewer people and less intensely. Far fewer feel strongly European.

These national identities really matter to many people. That's is why we need to respect both English and British identities. We need to talk about England as well as Britain.



English is a national identity, not an ethnic identity

The majority (75%) of people do not believe you have to be white to be English, and younger people have more inclusive views than older people. A minority (25%) does see English as a white, ethnic, identity. While this is a significant number, younger people have a more inclusive view of English identity as older people.⁴

Sometimes it is white, liberal, middle class people who insist – despite the evidence – that English is an ethnic identity. Unfortunately, this can inadvertently strengthen the view of some BAME residents that ‘Englishness is not for me’ and it can play into the hands of the far right who want English to be a white only identity.

⁴ YouGov for British Future

Labour should always reflect the majority view that Englishness is not a white, ethnic, identity and take positive steps to promote an inclusiveness. When, on St George's Day 2017, London Mayor Sadiq Khan said 'I'm proud to be a Londoner and I'm proud to be English' this was a positive message both to English identifying Londoners and to those with a migrant heritage who wanted to hear that Englishness was open to them.



Born to be English?

Most people do associate Englishness with being born here or with having an English parent. For this reason, those with a migrant heritage are more likely to feel English in the second and third generations.

Britishness is often seen as more immediately accessible for many migrants. Britishness can simply be a legal badge of citizenship. And, in former colonies, it was Britishness, rather than Englishness, that was promoted as the imperial identity.

Identities and their meanings do change over time. In the early 1980s it was widely held that BAME people would never feel British because of its association with colonialism and racism. Today, BAME communities are more likely to identify as British than the majority.

There is good reason to believe that English identity will become as widely shared amongst ethnic minorities as British is today. But we must not be complacent. The populist right will fight against it. Labour must actively champion an inclusive Englishness.

Englishness is not inherently right-wing⁵

Despite the recent tendency of English identifiers to vote towards the right, there is no evidence that these voters hold inherently right-wing views. On issues like NHS spending, redistribution and public ownership, these voters' views are very similar to the rest of the population.

English identifying voters do tend to feel more powerless in their lives and be more concerned about immigration. They worry about both the economic and cultural impact of migration.

Some voters oppose migration for racist reasons and would even be prepared to pay a high economic price to stop all immigration. Labour will not get (or want to get) their support. But most voters both value the **contribution** of migrants and want the immigration system to be under **control**⁶. Labour can reassure these voters in three ways:

- Voters who feel powerless are more likely to worry about rapid social change. Labour can make it clear that we are there to represent voters who have experienced the worst of economic and social change, and who have been hardest hit by austerity
- We can directly address some of the economic fears. As Jeremy Corbyn told the Scottish Labour conference: Labour wants to '(prevent) employers being able to import cheap agency labour, to undercut existing pay and conditions in the name of free market orthodoxy'.
- By showing that we share their pride in English identity, including celebrating St George's Day, we can reassure them that fears of migration destroying cultures are misplaced.

Labour campaigners should not assume that English identifiers are right wing. They will support many parts of Labour's economic and social programme. Where they have concerns we can listen and respond positively.

⁵ Denham and Devine, British Academy

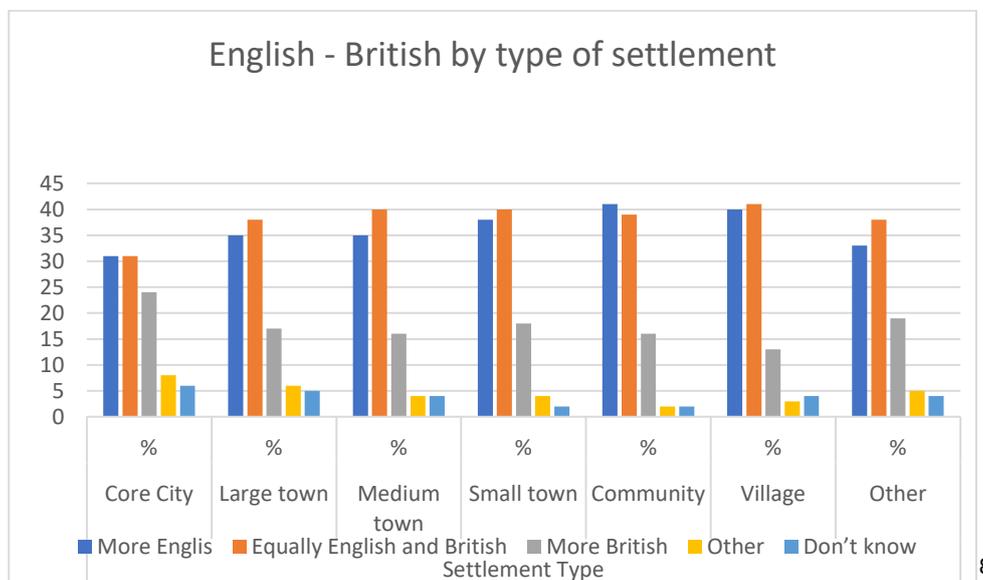
⁶ British Future

People who say they are English tend to be older, were less likely to go university, are working class, and live in smaller towns and communities⁷

They are typical of the voters than Labour will need to win at the next general election. Many of Labour’s target seats are in towns outside the big cities. In these places, there are many more people who are ‘more English’ than ‘more British’. Labour has to appeal to both English and British identities.

In the major cities, the numbers saying they are more English, more British and equally English and British are broadly similar. The cities are more polarised than the rest of England with fewer people saying they are equally English and British.

Outside the cities, there are more people who are equally English and British, and the ‘more English’ greatly outweigh the ‘more British’.



The variations in national identity between cities, towns and villages helps to explain why the experiences of Labour activists in communities of different size can be very distinct.

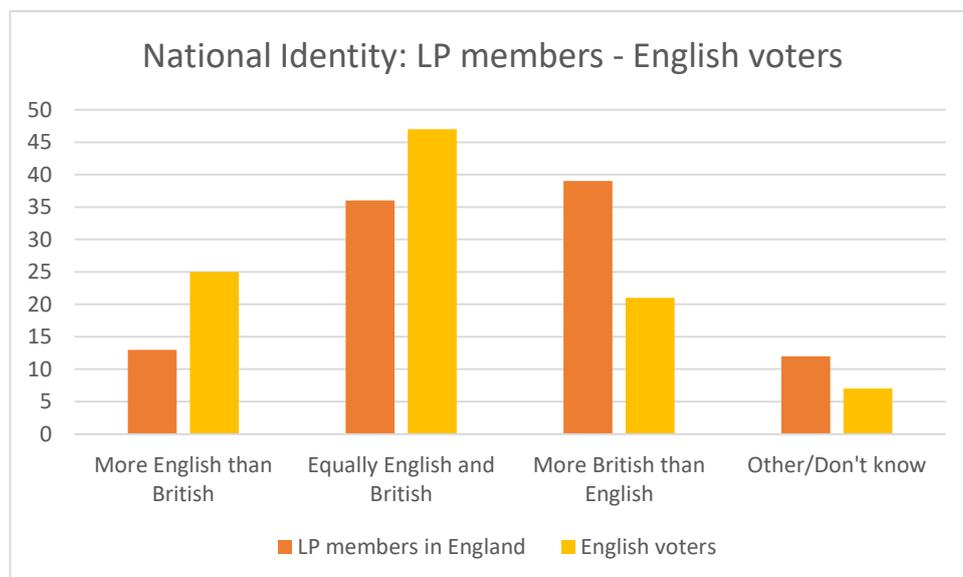
The evidence is clear: Labour needs to engaging with English identity (as well as British) in every part of England.

⁷ Centre for English Identity and Politics, Centre for Towns

Labour Party members are more likely to identify as British than the general population of England⁹

Of course, it's always a mistake to assume that voters see the world in the same way as Labour activists (or the activists of any other political party). On national identity, Labour members are significantly more British than the English public as a whole. Labour members are half as likely to say they are more English than British, and significantly fewer are even equally English and British.

It's important to remember that the voters outside our meetings may have a very different sense of identity to the members in the meeting.



We don't know why there is this difference in identities. It may reflect the demographics of Labour members, or it may reflect the values of people attracted to join Labour. Either way it highlights how Labour needs to make additional effort to engage with English identifying voters.

Flags, symbols and celebrations¹⁰

Support for symbols of England is widespread and shared across different communities. There is, however, no single symbol that everyone in England shares.

⁹ BES/Election Data 2015/16

¹⁰ YouGov/British Future

- Football: in 2016 74% of the general public, 74% of BAME, and 75% of Muslims saw the English football team as a symbol that belongs to every race and background
- St George's Flag: accepted by 57% general public, 57% BAME, 58% Muslim
- St George's Day parties: accepted by 59% general public, 54% BAME, 46% Muslim.

It is important to use the St George's flag appropriately in our campaigning and literature. The more we fly the flag and the more often it is seen on public building and private houses, the more it will become widely shared as our national flag. It will become harder for the populist right to claim the flag as theirs.

But it is also important to use other images – including the Union flag and well-known local symbols – that also reflect strongly held identities. Only using the St George's flag may be as counterproductive as not using it at all.

A majority of English residents want to see St George's Day celebrated more, believe it should be a bank holiday, and that the government should support it. That's Labour Party policy!

Points for Discussion

The questions below are suggested as discussion starters for Labour Party meetings. You might divide into groups to discuss the different sets of questions, or simply choose a few questions for a group discussion.

Identity and politics

- If Labour ignores people who feel English, we are ignoring a very large of the population. What are the political risks of doing this?
- Why might English identifiers be voting in different ways to British identifiers?
- Thinking about the place you live, in which areas are people most likely to feel strongly English? Who do they vote for at local and national elections? What is the potential for gaining more votes?

Labour members and English identity

- Why might Labour members' feel less English than the wider population?
- If you see a St George's Cross on a private house, do you: a. think the householder is proud to be English; b. assume that the householder is a right wing racist or; c. feel you will have little in common with them? And why?

Campaigning and communication

- Even if some people don't feel particularly patriotic, many voters do. What are the best ways of showing we understand their patriotism?
- There are right wing groups who want to push a racist view of Englishness. How can Labour best promote Englishness as an inclusive national identity? How can Labour's campaigning help to marginalise the far-right view of England?
- What are the strongest argument we can make to voters who value the contribution of migrants but still want to see the system under control?

Your part of England

- Thinking about your local area, what are the stories Labour can tell about its history, its people, and how they have helped build England?
- What opportunities are there to show the St George's flag more widely in your area, including local authority, religious, other public, businesses, sports clubs, and private buildings

Top tips for campaigning

Engaging with English identity does not require massive changes in the way we campaign. Here are a few simple tips:

Don't forget to call it England

Labour's biggest single problem is that we often don't mention England even when we are talking about England. Large areas of domestic policy including child care, school, further and higher education, the NHS, social care, most of transport, environment and agriculture are 'England only'. We should always make it clear how our policies on these issues will make a difference to England and its people. We should talk about Labour's plans for the NHS in England, Labour's call for a National Education Service for England, or Labour's proposal for free university education for England.

Tell a story of your place, of England and of Britain

Develop a consistent story to describe your local area, that links the place, England, and, if possible Britain. For example: 'the people of X town made goods sold around the world, making England and Britain strong. Labour will support the people of X town to make the country prosperous and strong again'.

Use well-known and diverse representatives and images

All our campaign material should reflect diversity, of course. It is particularly important that campaigns and communications that refer to England and English identity fully reflect the diversity of the local community. Use well known individuals alongside the St George flag, the union flag and well-known local images.

Campaign for Labour policy

It is Labour policy to have four new bank holidays, including St George's Day. Campaign for it on street stalls, petitions and on-line campaigns.

Celebrating St George's Day – England's national day

The type of activities we get involved in organising will depend on whether they are promoted by the Labour Party, or a community organisation or local authority. While party activities can be explicitly political, events organised by others should be non-party. However, there are a number of principles that should apply to all events.

It's not just about St George

St George is a semi (at least) mythical figure who was adopted as England's patron saint by Edward III. The saint's day is April 23rd. April 23rd is also celebrated as the birthday of England's most famous playwright, William Shakespeare. UNESCO have designated April 23rd as World English Language Day.

Our history has left us speaking the world's shared language and with family links to every corner of the globe. April 23rd is a chance to celebrate every part of our culture and community in England

It's a national day

Many minority communities celebrate dates or festivals including Chinese New Year, Divali, and Ramadan. St George's Day is different. **It is England's national day**; a day that everyone, from all communities can share. We should not promote St George's Day activities for just one part of the community.

It must be an inclusive day

Because some worry that English is seen as an ethnic identity, it is important to take active steps to ensure that all communities feel welcome to participate.

It's good to celebrate local identity at the same time as our national identity

Most people feel a strong identity with the place they live. They often share this local identity even if they have different national, ethnic or faith identities. By celebrating how a particular place makes England and Britain better, we can draw in more people and strengthen our common identities.

It's a chance to draw on shared histories and bring people together

It's the people who have made England what it is today. St George's Day can be a chance to remember the shared sacrifice of wars, the role of important local industries, local struggles against racism, for better housing, for the vote, and for equality.

The English Labour Network

Labour must win England. Despite Labour's welcome recovery in Scotland and strength in Wales, we cannot rely on success in these nations to deliver a Labour majority at the next election. We must continue to build support across England.

To win England, Labour policy and values must attract voters in every village, town and city across England and beyond our current areas of support.

The English Labour Network is campaigning for an **English Labour Manifesto** at the next election, to promote Labour's message to English voters and to give English Labour members the opportunity to shape policy for England.

To find out more about our work:

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