

on People with Disabilities
FOCUS



**GENERAL ELECTION 2005:
LIBERAL DEMOCRAT MANIFESTO
FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**



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For the Liberal Democrats equality of opportunity is not an optional extra – it is at the core of our political philosophy. Fighting discrimination in all its forms underpins our policies. Central to this is our long standing commitment to a single Equality Act to put disability legislation on a par with race and sex discrimination.

For people with disabilities, the disadvantages that many face can be traced directly to the way our society operates, particularly our benefit system and public services. Helping people to help themselves is what the Liberal Democrat approach is all about. This means promoting independent living where ever possible – more flexible access to the job market, improved mobility and access in the community, giving people greater control over their own healthcare.

Over a million people with disabilities want to work, yet the benefit system can actually hold them back. That is why more a more flexible system that involves 'partial capacity benefit' would enable more people to find fulfilment in the job market without fear of becoming ineligible for the benefits which are essential in making ends meet.

But as important as practical measures are, the Liberal Democrats want to tackle the marginalisation of people with disabilities within the political process. It is a scandal that at the last election disabled people found it impossible to vote at 3 out of 5 polling stations. This must be tackled because political participation is key to successful policies and action. And removing barriers to communication with the better use of IT, and promoting the UK Disabled People's Parliament figure heavily in our plans.

This manifesto sets out measures designed to break the cycle of exclusion that many disabled people face. The Liberal Democrats are determined that the voices of disabled people become impossible for society to ignore.

Charles Kennedy

Top 4 policies for people with disabilities

- **A Single Equality Act** - strengthening the fight against discrimination by putting disability legislation is on a par with race and sex discrimination.
- **Promoting independent living** - reforming the New Deal to help people with disabilities find work, providing a £200 a year winter fuel payment for the severely disabled and free off-peak local bus travel for all people with disabilities.
- **Accessible public services** - giving people with disabilities more control over their healthcare and ensuring that schools are able to deal with pupils with Special Education Needs.
- **A voice for people with disabilities** - by removing the barriers to communication and political participation.

This document contains Federal Liberal Democrat policy, except in areas where policy of the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats applies. A full costing document will be published at the same time as the General Election Manifesto.

Promoting independent living

Liberal Democrats want to see a society where we all share equality of opportunity, unimpeded by discrimination. People do not face disadvantage because of their disabilities but experience discrimination because of the way we organise society. It is our duty to ensure that education, work, public services and leisure are equally accessible to all people.

As well as fighting discrimination, it is essential to promote independent living for people with disabilities. Only one in two disabled people of working age are currently in employment, compared with 4 out of 5 non-disabled people. We must do more to help the over one million disabled people who want to work but don't have a job. The inflexibility of the benefit system also acts as a disincentive to disabled people looking to return to work. It is hugely difficult for many disabled people to work for the necessary 16 hours per week to qualify for the Working Tax Credit.

Equality of access to transport is essential to enable disabled people to achieve full social inclusion. Inaccessible transport severely restricts participation in society and access to healthcare and employment. A quarter of disabled people surveyed by Leonard Cheshire have turned down jobs due to inaccessible transport.

Disabled people have to deal with a series of expensive demands from healthcare to home adaptations, which add to the already spiralling costs of living. Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showed a growing gap between the benefits disabled people are receiving and their actual cost of living. We will do more to help with these costs, so that no one is unfairly disadvantaged.

We will:

- Strengthen the fight against discrimination with a single Equality Act to ensure that disability legislation is on a par with race and sex discrimination.

- Such legislation is crucial if the government's proposed Commission for Equality and Human Rights is to be effective.

- It would enforce protection from discrimination in fields such as employment, education and the provision of goods and services.

- Help people with disabilities find stable, long-term employment, by:

- Reforming the New Deal so that it supports those who need most help in accessing the job market. Individual Work Schemes would replace the current 'one size fits all' approach, offering more flexible and intensive help to those who experience severe difficulty in gaining employment.

- Investigating the feasibility of introducing a Partial Capacity Benefit for those able to do some work. This would enable and encourage people with disabilities to do varying amounts of paid work without fear of becoming ineligible for benefits.

- Promoting the Access to Work scheme - which provides advice and practical support to people with disabilities and their employers to help overcome work-related obstacles.

- Improve mobility and access – so that people with disabilities do not feel isolated from essential services and their wider community. We will:

- Provide free off-peak local bus travel for all people with disabilities. Outside the rush hour, thousands of local buses run virtually empty. We will give all people with disabilities (as well as pensioners) free off-peak local travel on local buses, as for example pensioners already have in London. That will mean much more freedom.

- Make the rail network more accessible – meaning that stations as well as vehicles must be accessible. According to research by Tripscope, 60% of stations in Britain are not accessible to people with disabilities. We will invest in improving the rail system by using savings from the roads budget.

- Invest in improving public transport. We will improve public transport by encouraging local authorities to extend the congestion charge where suitable. Congestion charging in London has cut pollution, cut traffic jams and paid for new investment in buses.

- Encourage local authorities to tackle fraud and abuse of the Blue Badge scheme. Measures could include appointing a Fraud Investigations officer or setting up a forum to investigate increasing mobility for people with disabilities.

- Improve access to public buildings. British Parliamentary buildings, administrative councils and heritage buildings would be encouraged to publish annual reports on any measures taken to increase

accessibility for people with disabilities.

- We will help people with disabilities deal with the extra costs of everyday living, by:

- Providing more support for energy costs. We will help severely disabled people of working age with their fuel bills by giving them the same £200 a year winter fuel payment that pensioners receive.

- Axing the unfair Council Tax – and replace with a fair and affordable Local Income Tax. Under the current Council Tax system, the poorest 10% pay over 4 times more of their income than the richest 10%. A Local Income Tax is based very simply on the ability to pay – so that no one pays more than they can afford.

- Encouraging local authority use of accessible housing registers. Centralising all local information about properties adapted for people with a physical disability speeds up the process of matching housing to people's needs, reduces waiting times and avoids unnecessary spending on adapting properties.

- Making homes more affordable. We will tackle the affordable housing crisis by encouraging the development of new forms of home ownership – particularly using shared ownership to provide affordable homes for local people. We will also make available some public sector land to build affordable homes for local people.

Accessible public services

People with certain disabilities such as special learning needs and mental health problems are amongst the poorest groups in society, die younger of preventable diseases than the rest of the population and miss out on life-saving screening programmes. Preventable deaths for people with learning disabilities are four times higher than for the rest of the population. Yet, people with disabilities do not all enjoy equal access to healthcare.

Long-term personal care also puts a huge financial strain on people with disabilities. Many local authorities are means-testing and charge people receiving continuing care when the NHS should meet the full cost of the person's care under existing legislation.

Almost one in five children - around 1.5 million - have some form of Special Educational Need. Yet barriers to

education mean that people with disabilities are more than twice as likely as non-disabled people to have no formal academic or vocational qualifications. Many children who should be able to be taught in mainstream settings are often turned away, while teaching staff feel ill-equipped to meet the wide range of pupil needs.

We will ensure that healthcare and education caters for the specific needs of people with disabilities and their families. We will:

- Give people with disabilities more control over their health and healthcare, by:
 - Providing more individualised treatment plans. We will encourage regular health MOTs, tailored to individual patients needs, with wider access to screenings and tests. People with long-term care needs should be entitled to a personal care plan they have agreed to.
 - Protecting the rights of people with mental health problems – by introducing new mental health legislation that safeguards their welfare and allows them to have more control over their own treatment.
 - Faster diagnosis for serious conditions – so that treatment is not delayed. Early identification of certain conditions can slow their progress and help the person affected and their families deal with the future. More tests and scans will be available in GPs' surgeries and pharmacies.
 - Setting up a review into current prescription charges - We will extend the range of long-term conditions, which qualify for exemption from prescription charges following an independent review.

School is often the first place where many disabilities are identified. It is crucial that teachers and parents are well equipped to deal with pupils with special educational needs in an inclusive way. Wherever possible, children with special educational needs or disabilities should be educated with their peers. We will:

- Offer schools a strategy for coping with Special Needs pupils in an inclusive way, by:
 - Early identification of pupils' special needs, through more childhood screening where necessary, especially for cognitive and sensory development.
 - Encouraging local authorities to establish inclusion development programmes. Children with special

needs should be assigned a key worker to identify and plan for their development needs and act as a contact point for parents and teachers. Teachers and classroom assistants should be better informed about dealing with children with special needs.

- Giving more support to special schools. We would look at ways of linking special schools to research departments in higher education institutes, so that new developments in special needs education can be put directly into practise in specialist schools and eventually spread to the mainstream.

- Reduce class sizes and provide better teacher training – so that pupils with special needs can receive more individual attention for their educational and social development.

We will:

- Reduce class sizes to 20 for 5-7 year olds and to 25 for 7-11 year olds.

- Ensure that all secondary level teachers are qualified to teach in the core subject areas of literacy, numeracy and ITC.

- Improve flexibility in learning, so that courses cater to the changing needs of pupils with disabilities. Special Needs pupils will particularly benefit from having more control over their learning schedules, with a broader choice of courses, combining academic and vocational training. We will:

- Establish a 'climbing frame of learning' – whereby pupils are able to pick a combination of academic and skills-based courses from a choice of schools and colleges. Testing would be reduced, as pupils would be able to accumulate credits in their own time.

- Expand opportunities for vocational and skills training. We will invest in a 'Colleges for the Future' programme – a new partnership between colleges, business, local authorities and the government to ensure modern, high quality college facilities in every community.

A voice for people with disabilities

Despite progress in recent years, people with disabilities continue to feel that their views are marginalized in our society. An NOP survey of people with disabilities found over three-quarters said they thought that their voice was not heard at national level. This has led to a feeling

of distrust of political parties and a subsequent low turnout in elections.

People with disabilities also encounter serious problems accessing the ballot box. At the last election, Scope found that people with disabilities found it difficult or impossible to vote at 3 out of 5 polling stations. Full participation in the political process should be open to all as a right of citizenship.

Removing the barriers to communication is a key everyday issue for people with disabilities. Better use must be made of information technology, so that people with disabilities can express their views and live autonomous, independent lives.

We will:

- Ensure that most public information leaflets and government documents are available in formats for visually impaired people as well as for other people with disabilities.

- Work to make service providers' websites fully accessible to people with disabilities. The Internet can provide a vital link to the outside world for some physically disabled people. Yet many websites still fail basic accessibility criteria.

- Remove the barriers to political participation:

- Polling stations should be situated in premises accessible people with disabilities, such as on low levels for wheelchair access.

- We will raise public awareness of facilities and provisions for disabled voters and of alternative voting methods, such as postal voting.

- Promote the participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of public life, including for instance acting as jurors and councillors.

- Represent the views and concerns of people with disabilities, by

- Encouraging access to advocacy if they need it. Existing advocacy and information and advice networks need to be actively promoted.

- Promoting citizens' initiatives such as the UK Disabled People's Parliament – a national body to represent the collective interests of all disabled people.



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