

*on Families*  
**FOCUS**



**GENERAL ELECTION 2005:  
LIBERAL DEMOCRAT MANIFESTO  
FOR FAMILIES**



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In the 21st Century, the modern British family comes in many different shapes and sizes. We are no longer a nation that has one universal family structure.

But all families share common concerns. How can we give our children the best start in life? How can we balance the needs of home and work? How can we ensure our financial security?

These are the issues that the Liberal Democrats are determined to address.

Every parent wants the best for their child. Expert opinion and common sense agree that children well taught and well cared-for in their early years have a far better chance of living fulfilled and rewarding lives.

Those on low-incomes don't always have the option of staying at home to look after a new baby. This especially true for the first baby, when financial problems are most acute. We will institute a Maternity Income Guarantee for the first child for the first six months. This would be set at the level of the minimum wage and mean a minimum of £170 a week for working mothers, offered as an alternative to the current system of Statutory Maternity Pay.

Our Maternity Income Guarantee for the first child will help to prevent this most exciting of times for new parents being marred by the financial worry that can so often accompany it.

Children growing up in a supportive environment are more likely to be confident and successful when they start school. This in turn means they are less likely to play up in the classroom or play truant on the streets.

That is why the Liberal Democrats have plans to roll out more Children's Centres and to invest more money in the crucial first years of formal education. Rather than locking up billions of pounds in Child Trust Funds for 18 years olds, we would spend the money now, when children really need it. This will mean cutting class sizes in infants schools so that our children get the attention and help they deserve.

This manifesto for families sets out a range of policies – from childcare to education – from maternity support to the job market – from legal rights to poverty reduction – all designed to increase support for families and maintain the family's central place in our society.

*Charles Kennedy*

***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.***



## ***Top 4 Liberal Democrat policies for Families***

- **Maternity Pay** - offer new mothers a Maternity Income Guarantee, equivalent to the minimum wage of £170 per week for the first 6 months after the birth of their first child as an alternative to Statutory Maternity Pay, currently set at £102 per week.
- **Childcare** - reduce class sizes for 5-7 year olds, create 3500 Children's Centres, extend pre and after school care to all schools and increase nursery care for 3-4 year olds.
- **Family security** – axe the council tax and replace with fair and affordable Local Income Tax, reform the tax credit system, make housing more affordable, offer tailored help for parents and young adults to find work.
- **Protecting children's rights** - introducing a rights-based Children's Commissioner and child custody arrangements according to the best interests of the child

## **Supporting parents, supporting children**

Early childhood is a crucial period in human development. There is compelling evidence that children benefit most from a combination of home care for the first two years of life followed by a fully integrated daycare system where they receive high quality educational and developmental care up until school starting age.

Too much of the Government's policy has been about sending parents back to work after the birth of a child. Parents should have a greater range of options available: be it caring for children at home, returning to work or a combination of the two.

To make this choice meaningful for those on a low-income, wanting to start a family, measures need to be taken to help with the financial burden associated with making the decision to have children. The current rate of maternity pay does not go far enough to meet the many costs of having children for the first time. These 'start-up' costs are harshest at the outset of family life, when parents have new clothes and equipment to buy and are yet to receive the child and other family benefits that come after the birth of a first child (and increase as the family grows).

At present, statutory maternity pay of 90% of salary for six weeks and £102 for another 20 weeks, is a real struggle for working women on low incomes. It's also unfair: a woman who is working part time may not even get the basic £102. For such a low paid working woman – especially if she is single – this is a desperate start with her new born baby; and a serious disadvantage to that child just as it is setting out on its journey through life.

Liberal Democrats are committed to giving new families a more solid and structured financial start. We would:



- Offer new mothers the option of receiving a Maternity Income Guarantee, equivalent to the minimum wage of £170 per week for the 6 months after the birth of their first child, as an alternative to Statutory Maternity Pay. This would guarantee at least £4,420 for working mothers when they are starting a family. There are enormous benefits to this:

- New parents, particularly those on a low income, will have a significant boost to their income, helping counter the threat of financial hardship.

- Mothers would receive sustained support over a period of time, allowing them to effectively plan for their child's first 6 months of life.

- Employers would benefit, as this is a payment that would come directly from the state. They would no longer have to carry the financial and administrative burden of Statutory Maternity Pay.

- No woman would be worse off. The Maternity Income Guarantee would be an option alongside the current system of Statutory Maternity Pay, allowing women to choose the system that works best for them.

- Make workplaces more responsive to the needs of a young family, by promoting a culture of good work/life balance and allowing employees to have a say in positive changes to their

work environment, via measures such as greater workplace consultation.

- Encourage home working, part-time working and self-employment, by raising the status of such work and ensuring they are awarded the same rights and protection as full-time permanent workers.

## **Childcare: putting children first**

Access to high quality childcare and education has wide-ranging benefits for children's social, cognitive and emotional development, as well as allowing parents to work. Although the Government has increased the money put into childcare provision since 1997, a large number of parents are still unable to afford any formal childcare, meaning that many children are losing out on its benefits completely.

Studies have found that there is still a big problem with the creation of places in disadvantaged areas, regional inequality, the sustainability of places and the provision of training and support for childcare providers. Meanwhile, the Government has set up the misguided Child Trust Fund, which gives a cash handout to 18 year olds, rather than channelling the resources into helping children in

their early years – precisely when they need it most.

To ensure that no child loses out on the benefits of professional childcare and educational/social development, we would:

- Reduce average maximum class sizes at Key Stage one (aged 5-7) from 30 to 20. This would:

- Ensure that all 5-7 year olds receive more individual attention for their educational and social development.

- Allow Special Educational Needs pupils to receive particular attention without causing disruption to their fellow classmates.

- Ease the transition into formal schooling, as children would continue to receive close attention.

We will fund this by scrapping the Government's Child Trust Fund and spending the money where it makes the most difference.

- Implement key elements of the 10 Year Childcare Strategy. We would:

- Roll out 3500 children's centres by 2010, providing

integrated childcare, early education and family services to the under 5's. Children in isolated rural areas would particularly benefit.

- Extend free part-time early education places for three and four year-olds to four hours a day for 38 weeks of the year and increase the flexibility for parents to use these hours.

- Offer pre and after school care to all school-age children by opening schools from 8.00am to 6.00pm. We would make sure that responsibility to coordinate this remained with LEAs, without adding to the workload of individual head teachers.

- Create a 'Children's Profession' of early years workers. This would establish a new qualification of Qualified Early Years Teacher, at the level of current teaching qualifications. We would also set up a professional body for early years staff with the power to strike off the register staff, which break its code of conduct.

- Incorporate communication and training networks for nannies and childminders in Children's Centres. We would encourage

greater use of childminders, who can offer more flexibility for meeting parents' needs than other provision at fixed hours of the day.

- Encourage and recognise informal childcare such as family and community networks, which are widely used by parents, particularly from ethnic minority groups.

## ***Giving families security***

The Department for Work and Pension's figures show that over 3 million children are living in poverty. For children growing up in low income families the poverty they experience at such a critical age can stop them from fulfilling their potential later in life. The negative long-term consequences of a lack of economic, social, physical, environmental, cultural and political resources during a child's early years cannot be easily remedied in adulthood. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy has made progress in tackling the challenge, largely by focusing on improving parental employment.





However, anti-poverty measures have yet to gain a high enough profile and do not sufficiently address the human dimension of poverty, which is necessary to meet the target of eradicating child poverty by 2020.

As part of a crosscutting approach to tackling poverty in low-income households, we would:

- Give families more security by scrapping the fundamentally unfair Council Tax, which places a severe financial burden on many low-income families. Under the council tax system, the poorest 10% pay over 4 times more of their income than the richest 10%. We would replace it with a Local Income Tax, which is based on people's ability to pay – so that no one pays more than they can afford.
- Reform the Child and Working Tax Credit system, to improve the system of financial support for parents, by allocating Child and Working Tax Credits as a fixed-term award for at least 6

months. This would simplify the system, ensuring that parents know exactly how much money to expect for a fixed length of time and stop minor/temporary changes in circumstance leading to a change in entitlements. The application process would be simplified for initial application and reassessment.

- Make housing more affordable by developing new forms of affordable homeownership, between full renting and full owner-occupation. Measures would include mutual home ownership in which a household will own shares in the mutual housing association which in turn owns the home in which they live. A stake can be built up over time. We will also free up much more land for housing, satisfying more demand and lowering the prices of new houses.
- Establish a scheme for the civil registration of partnerships, for all couples. This will give two unrelated adults who wish to register a settled personal relationship legal rights, such as

next-of-kin arrangements.

- Help single and lone parents to re-enter the job market, by setting them up on Individual Work Schemes, modelled on the existing Employment Zones in the areas of highest unemployment. This alternative to the current New Deal would tailor assistance to the individual jobseekers, so that they get the package of support they need to find work.
- Recognize and encourage the vital importance of foster carers in society, by implementing the planned national system of allowances to cover the costs of caring for children and carry out more research into the financial and social needs of children in foster care.
- Provide more information for families to deal with the causes and effects of poverty. Children's Centres would provide information for visiting parents about dealing with the benefit system by widening the scope of the Centre's existing employment and health advice surgeries. This could increase benefit take-up and clarify the options available to families to deal with debt and effectively organise their finances.

## ***A better family life***

Liberal Democrats recognise that helping families does not stop at ensuring children get the best start in life. Parents, older children and grandparents would benefit from better-run, locally available public services, a fairer tax and benefit system and more security in old age. A greater commitment to environmental sustainability would immediately improve the quality of life for all and benefit families for generations to come.

### ***Education:***

- We are committed to scrapping tuition and top-up fees. No one should be deterred from going to university because they come from a low-income family, which cannot afford the fee and subsistence costs of higher education.
- School-age children would benefit from good schools

available to all locally and teachers properly qualified in core subjects, free from the false targets and the bureaucratic burden of constant testing.

- The education system would be based on the needs of the pupil: a 'Colleges for the Future' programme would provide the option of more skills and vocational-based training.

### **Health:**

- We would provide free personal care for older people – the burden of care would not fall on families or force people to sell their homes in old age.

- We would free doctors and nurses from central targets and bureaucracy and provide healthcare determined by and for local people, according to local needs.

### **Older people:**

- We would implement a Citizen's Pension, which puts over £100 more on the pension every month at 75 and takes a million pensioners immediately off means-testing. Women would particularly benefit, as it would be based on residency not National Insurance contributions – meaning long periods away from the labour market would not affect final the final pension sum.

### **Community safety:**

- We would cut crime and the fear of crime by putting 10,000 more police on the streets. Today, the average police officer spends twice as much time on paperwork as they do on the street. We'll cut this unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape, and provide them with new technologies so they can spend more time keeping our streets safer.

### **Environment:**

- We would tackle climate change and cut pollution and congestion. We would promote the use of public transport and encourage households to reduce domestic waste and promote recycling.

## **Protecting the rights of the child**

England is the last of the UK's countries to create the post of a Children's Commissioner. However, following the Government's removal of several amendments to the Children's Bill in the House of Lords, not only does the mandate of the Commissioner fall far short of international standards, but it is severely limited in terms of enforcement. The absence of an obligation to safeguard and promote the rights of children is a striking omission. It is the central aim of all 3 of the other Commissioners.

According to the Children Act 1989, the welfare of the child should be the paramount consideration in any court decision concerning a child's upbringing. We believe that this should be sustained without qualification. In divorce and separation proceedings child custody is often a point of strong contention between both parents. Bitter battles and struggles over child custody often force ex-partners into long, expensive court proceedings that leave both parents and children upset and emotionally charged. To improve the consequences of divorce for children and their parents we must work on greater resolution before the legal stage and ensure that the rights of the child are upheld throughout.

To ensure that the best interests of the child come first when policies are proposed and reviewed where their interests are involved, we would:

- Strengthen the post of Children's Commissioner in England, by making its power rights-based. The Commissioner will be obliged to consider the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in safeguarding the rights, interests and welfare of children. It should be wholly independent of the Government and have real power to review existing and

proposed legislation and guidance concerning children.

- Reform the system of child support. The Child Support Agency often requires parents to pay an unrealistic amount of maintenance, but has also failed to enforce those payments. We would put child maintenance payments in the hands of the effective and credible Inland Revenue so that each case is effectively dealt with according to the particular needs of the child.

- The Inland Revenue would calculate initial maintenance guidelines, administer and enforce the collection of maintenance.

- A family tribunal service, as part of an expanded Appeals Service, would allow for variation in cases and move away from the current principle of 'one size fits all'.

- We would offer incentives to parents who cooperate with their initial settlement.

- Ensure that child custody decisions are made on an individual basis, with the best interests of the child as paramount. The focus must be on finding pre-court resolutions. We would:

- Base our approach on the principle of quality access for both parents, except where the child's safety is at risk.

- Focus on promoting pre-court early intervention schemes, where both parents can avoid damaging legal disputes by cooperating to provide for the physical, emotional and financial support of the child.

- Reform the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), firstly by improving its current administrative function and then by looking at ways to involve it in the pre-court phase of custody resolution, providing much needed continuity for all involved. All attempts should be made to avoid a damaging legal dispute.



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