

*on Rural Affairs*  
**FOCUS**



**GENERAL ELECTION 2005:  
LIBERAL DEMOCRAT MANIFESTO  
FOR RURAL AFFAIRS**



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Agriculture is in a state of continuing crisis, the transport system is inadequate, local schools are closing down and public services generally are stretched. Labour does not seem to care about the countryside, but we also remember the damage suffered by the rural economy under the previous 18 years of Conservative rule.

We need to build up sustainable rural communities, capable of meeting the needs of local people. There is a particular problem of lack of affordable housing in many rural areas, with local families priced out of the areas where they were born. Rural post offices, which are at the heart of many communities, are still closing down all over the country. Liberal Democrats locally and nationally have a consistent record of working hard to offer imaginative and effective solutions to problems like these.

Of course farming remains at the heart of the rural economy and rural life. Farmers are often the custodians of the countryside that we love. That is why we have developed long term policies for the future of agriculture. In particular we want to reform the use of CAP funding to move towards sustainable local development, and away from trade distorting subsidies. We also believe that government action is needed to redress the balance of power between the big supermarket chains on one hand, and consumers and small producers on the other.

I believe that our rural communities can have a thriving future, and this manifesto sets out some of the ways Liberal Democrats will help them to achieve it.

*Charles Kennedy*

## **Top Liberal Democrat Policies for Rural Communities**

- **Provide more affordable homes for local people**, through development of new forms of affordable home ownership, and requiring people to get planning permission before turning another full-time home into a holiday home.
- **Introduce small business rate relief**, allowing firms with a rateable value of less than £25,000 to claim a business rate allowance of up to £1,500.
- **Ensure fair prices for food** - introduce a legal duty to trade fairly, enforced by a Food Trade Inspector within the Office of Fair Trading.
- **Reform the Common Agricultural Policy** to support traditional farming, organic systems, new opportunities for agricultural products, and local markets.
- **Reform the Common Fisheries Policy** to give fishermen and other stakeholders a real say in the management of their own regional waters.
- **Protect the Post Office Network**, by developing a business plan for the network based on post offices providing a combination of commercial services, benefits transactions and government information.

## Rural Services

**Affordable homes for locals.** Rural people are being priced out of the housing market as the gap between wages and house prices widens. We will tackle the affordable housing crisis by encouraging the development of new forms of home ownership, particularly using shared ownership to help people on low rural wages get a home of their own. We will reform VAT to encourage developers to repair and re-use empty buildings and brownfield land, rather than always building over the countryside. In areas where second homes are overwhelming the local housing market, we will require people to get planning permission before turning another full-time home into a holiday home.

**10,000 more police – cutting crime and the fear of crime.** By getting rid of Labour's expensive, illiberal and ineffective ID card scheme, we can pay for 10,000 police on top of Labour's plans, in addition to completing existing plans for an extra 20,000 community support officers to back them up. The average police officer today spends more time in the police station than they do on the street. We will give the police the technology and simplify the bureaucracy to allow them to spend more time on patrol, and less time tied to the desk. We will also introduce a new Local Policing Contract providing for a 'minimum policing guarantee' for local people.

**Cut class sizes – using the £1.5 billion Child Trust Fund.** Expert opinion confirms what common sense tells us: children well taught and well cared-for in their early years have a opportunity to lead successful and rewarding lives. The government's Child Trust Fund, by contrast, just hands out a cash windfall to 18 year olds at taxpayers' expense. Liberal Democrats will use this money better, by cutting infant class sizes from the present maximum of 30 to an average of 20 and junior class to an average of 25, so giving every child the best possible start at school.

**Protect the Post Office Network.** Over 3000 post offices have closed under Labour, and even more closed under the Conservatives. Our priority is to secure a viable future for the Post Office network. We will do this by developing a business plan for the network based on post

offices providing a combination of commercial services, benefits transactions and government information, increasing viability for all post offices.

## Rural Business

**Cut the red tape that stops businesses from growing.** Liberal Democrats will slash the red tape, bureaucracy and over-regulation that is holding rural businesses back – especially small businesses. We will start with these three measures:

- No new regulation will be passed until there is a full published assessment of its costs and necessity.
- New regulations which affect business will automatically be scrapped unless Parliament specifically approves their renewal after a period specified in a 'sunset clause'.
- Endless visits by all sorts of inspectors will be replaced in most cases by one all-purpose inspection.

Introduce small business rate relief. Many small businesses pay a disproportionate amount in rates – as much as 35% of their profits. We will help small businesses by reforming the business rates system to allow firms with a rateable value of less than £25,000 to claim a business rate allowance of up to £1,500. This would represent a saving of over £600 a year for the majority of small businesses. We will reform the valuation system to base rates on site

value, rather than penalise businesses that invest in their premises.

## Farming and Fishing

**Fair prices for food.** For every £1 consumers spend on food in supermarkets, just 8 pence goes to the farmer. Liberal Democrats will introduce a legal duty to trade fairly, enforced by a Food Trade Inspector within the Office of Fair Trading. This will protect farmers and consumers from unfair practices by supermarkets and processing companies.

**Speed up reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.** The CAP fails to protect the interests of rural communities, family farms and the environment. We will press the EU to speed up reform so that available public funding is used to provide public benefits including improved access and environmental protection, and support traditional farming, organic systems, new opportunities for agricultural products, and local markets. We will use the UK's flexibility to better support family farms and aid new entrants.

**Save our fish and marine environment.** We will seek early further reform of the Common Fisheries Policy to give fishermen and other stakeholders a real say in the management of their own regional waters. We will update and strengthen the powers of Sea Fisheries Committees, while protecting their operational boundaries. We will introduce a Marine Act to create a marine



planning system to resolve problems of conflicting uses of the sea and seabed, to establish conservation zones for highly sensitive areas and to strengthen protection of commercial fish stocks, dolphins, porpoises and other endangered marine wildlife. We will, in consultation with the appropriate representative bodies, protect some fish stocks and zones for recreational sea anglers, which will then be supported with a new licensing system.

## ***The Countryside***

**No commercial GM crops unless we know they're safe for the environment.** We support the right of communities to create GM-free zones. We will insist on rigorous schemes of labelling and traceability in food to guarantee consumer choice. At the same time we will introduce measures to promote organic farming.

**Country Sports.** We have no plans to introduce any new restrictions on fishing or shooting sports, other than a minimum age limit of 14 for participating in shoots. We will always look carefully at any new proposals to maintain and improve standards of public safety, countryside management and animal welfare.

**Access to the Countryside.** Public access to the countryside comes through a mixture of footpaths, by-ways, roads used as public paths, bridle paths and the newer rights of way. We will seek to update

these rights to create a coherent modern system, suited to the needs of residents and visitors alike, while protecting the fragile nature of historically important routes and sites. We would use land in public ownership, such as forestry land and military land, to provide opportunities for any additional intrusive activities, including those involving motor vehicles, rather than impacting on local residents and fragile eco-systems.

## ***Rural Transport***

**Reward owners of less polluting cars with lower taxes.** For many people, particularly in rural areas, cars are a necessity and cannot be replaced by public transport. But they can be far less damaging to the environment when they use less fuel or alternative fuels. We will start by reforming the VED system for taxing cars to cut tax on those that pollute less, funded by increasing it on those that pollute more. In the longer term, as technology allows, we will scrap petrol duties and VED altogether, replacing the revenue with a national road user charging system based on location, congestion and pollution (including the level of pollution of the particular vehicle). As a result, pollution and congestion will be better targeted rather than the present heavy taxes on every journey: Department for Transport research shows most journeys will be cheaper as a result, while congestion and pollution will be more effectively cut. This change will particularly benefit rural drivers, because of the relatively

low congestion on rural roads.

Free off-peak local bus travel – for all pensioners and people with disabilities. Outside the rush hour, thousands of local buses run virtually empty. Liberal Democrats will give pensioners and disabled people free off-peak local travel on local buses. That will mean more freedom for them; better use made of our expensive transport system; and less congestion and pollution for everyone.

**School Transport.** We will restore the right of children to free school transport when they live more than two miles from their designated primary school, and three miles for secondary school children, which is being taken away by the Labour Government.

**Cut lorry traffic, reduce pollution, and make our towns and villages safer.** We will encourage the development of freight interchanges to facilitate growth in rail freight. In addition, we believe government should develop a shipping, ports and waterways strategy. Transport has to learn to live within its environmental means. We will not proceed with major new road build schemes unless the benefits are clear, including environmental and safety factors and a full assessment of alternative public transport schemes. Resources switched from the roads programme will be used to increase investment in public transport schemes.

***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.***



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Published & promoted: Chris Rennard on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, both at 4 Cowley Street, London SW1P 3NB. Printed: Park Communications, Lea Mill, Eastway, London, E9 5NU. 020 8525 6200