

Association of Scottish Liberal Democrat Councillors

Make councils work for you: Scottish Liberal Democrat priorities for local government

The challenge:

Scottish Liberal Democrats are on the rise again – and intent on winning more seats and playing a major part in Scottish councils after the 2017 elections. Liberal Democrat councillors and campaigners make a difference in local communities, are in tune with local people and bring a coherent philosophy and competence to our work.

Liberal Democrat councillors offer something unique. We have a specific approach to politics and representation which is clearly different from the competition, and which brings a campaigning style to the very different issues arising in varying parts of the country.

We believe in people and their potential. Community politics and community power - local decision-making and support for local people - are at the heart of Liberal Democrat campaigning.

Democratic politics has seldom been as much in need of liberal values as now, whether in Scotland, the UK, the EU or across the world. Nasty and backward-looking sentiments of both the right and the left, and distrust of institutions bring with them major threats to freedom and opportunity, to our open society, and even to the safety and security of individuals.

Liberal Democrats in local government:

Scottish Liberal Democrat councillors have a proven record:

- As excellent councillors and good representatives of the people;
- In raising the quality of local government;
- In bringing a specific liberal framework of values and campaigning style with community politics, community power and local decision-making at the heart of all that we do;
- Of standing for the public interest, building the conditions for liberty and social justice, and fighting poverty and oppression;
- Of protecting and enhancing the free movement of ideas, people, goods and services.

The national perspective: Scotland, the United Kingdom and Europe

Liberal Democrats believe that local elections should be about important local issues and basic services vital to local communities. Yet, in 2017, local policies and voters' decisions are likely to be dominated as never before by national challenges.

The wellbeing of individuals, communities and our economy is subject to the major uncertainties of the Brexit vote to leave the European Union, the threat of a further referendum on Scottish independence and the sense of alienation still felt by many people after the banking collapse.

Liberal Democrats support a pluralist and federal view of government, reflecting personal, national and other identities and working through a series of partnerships at community, Scottish, United Kingdom, European and international organisations.

- Liberal Democrats support and wish to strengthen Scotland’s place in the family of the United Kingdom, reformed along federal lines to better reflect the diversity of the nations and regions of Britain;
- Liberal Democrats support Britain’s continued membership of the European Union. We back a further referendum to give people across the UK the final say on the terms of any Brexit deal;
- Liberal Democrats believe that local councils have their own statutory and democratic mandate and should not be regarded merely as agents of central government – and we strongly support the concept of parity of esteem between local and central government;
- Liberal Democrats champion the decentralisation of as much power as possible to local councils and communities;
- Liberal Democrats will continue to work to give all citizens an effective stake in the communities of the future, making sure nobody is left out or alienated.

We want to work in a partnership of equals with the Scottish and UK governments and the European Union. We believe that people count, not public bureaucracy, and we reject the centralist philosophy that government knows best.

Council powerhouses for the community

Local councils face unprecedented challenges from budget cuts and increasing central control. Liberal Democrats believe that local councils have a legitimate democratic mandate and should be champions for local people. They should work for and with local communities, delivering and initiating services that work for people and are flexible and suited to local needs. They should work in a transparent way, free from bureaucratic jargon and from unnecessary central direction.

Liberal Democrat priorities are:

- Powerful and well-run local councils with a “can do, will do” attitude, and a strong commitment to community power and to the delivery of first class local services;
- An education service which enables all young people to achieve their potential – making sure that extra money reaches schools to increase attainment and close the attainment gap – together with flexible, affordable, fulltime early education and childcare places for all families who need them;
- Mental health support made quick, effective and easily available;
- Homes for all, tackling poverty and building opportunity;
- Greener and cleaner communities – served by greener transport systems with local roads and pavements brought up to a safe condition, and a Scotland-wide integrated public transport system;
- Support for the local economy in partnership with local business.

The local perspective: make councils work for you

Liberal Democrats will use the powers of councils to the full in the interests of local communities and will campaign for additional powers to be returned from the Scottish Government.

Strong local communities are at the heart of a democratic society and strong councils should be accessible, accountable and fully engaged with people and communities.

We will:

- Ensure that councils adopt a “can do, will do” attitude, delivering excellent services for people;
- Place high value on effectiveness and efficiency in the delivery of core services, guaranteeing value for money to local taxpayers and promoting good government by supporting well-qualified professional staff;
- Remove the barriers to people participating in their community and in local democracy by making sure councils use plain English to explain their plans and that local people have more chance to be involved at an early stage in decisions affecting them or their neighbourhood;
- Build capacity in voluntary and community organisations, so they can do more in their local areas, including running local services or facilities such as community halls, amenity spaces and small parks;
- Use the power of councils to bring different services and public and voluntary sector agencies together to develop Shared Service Hubs using halls, libraries, advice centres, post offices and café facilities as appropriate;
- Enhance the powers of community councils and area committees on matters such as common good, ceremonial matters, town provosts, street naming, town twinning or local facilities;
- Campaign to bring more democracy into the council chamber including effective procedures to question the council leader, public petition arrangements and regular Town Hall meetings in local communities;
- Take a wide view of the common good to make sure that council decisions do not harm the interests of people served by other public or voluntary bodies;
- Help local communities engage meaningfully with Police Scotland in order to influence the style and priorities of local policing;
- Oppose Scottish government plans for further centralisation, campaign for the reduction of restrictive central government interference and the restoration of council control over the council tax and business rates.

Scottish education the best in the world for every young person

Liberal Democrats champion education to enable everyone to fulfill their potential and to contribute to society. Providing young people with a world class education is essential to our country’s economic future.

We will:

- Campaign for the Scottish Liberal Democrat “Penny for Education” to secure a transformative £500 million investment for education, and make sure extra money goes to schools to increase attainment for all pupils and to close the gap that exists between young people from poorer backgrounds and their classmates;
- Decentralise more powers to schools, working with parents, to take decisions over the mix of staff, ethos and local priorities, particularly through our Pupil Premium proposals to give extra support to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. We oppose both the Tory free-for-all proposals and the SNP plan for regionalisation of education, and support the continued role of local authorities to set standards and strategy, and provide supporting services;
- Help staff to deliver top quality leadership in our schools, delivering an education system which again challenges the best in the world;
- Spread and encourage best practice as corporate parents to get the best outcomes for looked-after young people, those in kinship care and those with additional support needs such as autism, developmental disorders or mental health problems;
- Use informal education, through youth work and youth clubs, as a way to raise attainment especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The importance of early years and family support is now widely accepted to raise the life chances of children. Liberal Democrats will build on the success of the extension of early education and childcare. We will:

- Deliver flexible, accessible and affordable full-time early education and childcare so that parents can access locally the hours they have been promised by the Scottish Government;
- Continue to support effective early intervention to support the wellbeing of children;
- Support the introduction of a play and communication strategy to ensure that young children starting school are not held back by communication problems;
- Campaign for a full and independent review of the Named Person legislation following the critical Supreme Court ruling.

Campaigning for mental health and wellbeing

Liberal Democrats have led the campaign for better support for people with mental health problems and continue to campaign for much-improved services. We will work in partnership with health services:

- Make mental health support quick, effective and locally available to all those who need it;
- Make sure local authorities are mental health champions, promoting good health and helping people back into employment when necessary;
- Make sure local education services identify young people with mental health problems and help them get early support, and continue to help them as they transfer to adult services;
- Take seriously the health and well-being of carers, providing support and respite;
- Support voluntary groups that help people tackle loneliness and isolation.

Homes for All; Tackling Poverty; Building Opportunity

Local councils should take an effective role in tackling poverty, cutting family living costs and building opportunity. Meeting the needs for affordable housing, both urban and rural, is one important step. We will:

- Support the building throughout Scotland of thousands more socially rented houses, using new funding methods such as pension funds and developers' assets where possible;
- Expand the supply of low cost housing options, particularly for young people;
- Focus on overcoming rural poverty and lack of opportunities in rural areas, supporting rural transport and superfast broadband in particular;
- Work to provide quality social and community care to all who need it;
- Use councils' negotiating and initiating clout to secure cheaper energy prices for local citizens by acting as either purchasers or generators of energy, as part of a programme to tackle the poverty premium that often means that people on the lowest incomes pay more for basic services;
- Support the provision of fair and affordable banking, insurance and financial services, and the expansion of credit unions and advice services.

Greener and cleaner communities

The condition of Scotland's roads and streets is often lamentable. Potholes cause accidents to pedestrians and cyclists, rough roads destroy the comfort of bus and car journeys alike, while constant ad hoc road repair works are an inconvenience and a drag on the economy.

Liberal Democrats will:

- Commit new resources from within councils to make transport safer and tackle the chronically poor condition of local roads and pavements using the principle of right- first-time to improve the quality of repairs;
- Introduce modern and innovative designs for local streetscapes to make residential streets places for walking, talking and playing;
- Support measures to make travel to school safer and more child-friendly and to reduce congestion at school gates;
- Use the powers and influence of local authorities to support transport integration and smart ticketing across Scotland, and put a priority on helping young people to get to college or work;
- Support the switch to electric and dual-fuel for public and private vehicles, with charging points and priority measures as part of councils' exemplary Green Transport Plans;
- Back local communities with more effective enforcement of planning and environmental controls, delivering clean local environments.

Supporting local jobs, town centres and the local economy

Liberal Democrats will champion the role of councils in local economic development, and set the standard for fair employment practice, fair pay and youth employment. We want reinvigorated town centres and local communities which work for local people. We will:

- Champion local economic development, making full use of councils' economic clout, with better partnerships with local business over decisions and priorities, including any changes to business rates;
- Support local high streets, increasing the footfall by converting empty shops for alternative uses such as multi-use hubs for public agencies, employment projects or residential accommodation where sensible;
- Support good employment practice within councils and through their contracts to support fair pay, equal pay, youth employment and local suppliers;
- Seek to provide more apprenticeships in every council for local school-leavers;
- Work for greater localization of food chains, encouraging more use of local produce.

Paying for local services: funding local councils:

Local Authorities have suffered greater cuts to their budgets than most sectors, damaging their ability to provide first class services and support local communities. Liberal Democrats will:

- Campaign for improved resources from the Scottish government;
- Work to increase the proportion of council funding determined locally;
- Focus on improving efficiency and providing value for money in service provision;
- Eliminate wasteful, bureaucratic or unnecessary expenditure;
- Make fuller use of public buildings and resources;

Note:

Liberal Democrats support the local mandate of our local authorities and of local Liberal Democrat council groups. This document is not a manifesto in the normal way but a statement of the principles and approach applied by Liberal Democrats in their local councils and communities to the very different local challenges and decisions they face. It will form the basis of more comprehensive local policy platforms appropriate for each council area.