

From Local Roots to Global Reach: A Liberal Vision for Universities

British universities are a world-leading export and an engine for innovation. They drive regional economies, host groundbreaking research, and provide life-changing opportunities.

But today, the sector is at a breaking point. Students are facing a cost-of-living nightmare, with 40% living on less than £100 a month after rent. Meanwhile, the Labour Government's National Insurance hike and international student levy are draining nearly £700m from campuses annually.

The Liberal Democrats paid a heavy political price for making promises on tuition fees we couldn't keep. We've learned from that.

That's why we are not making unrealistic pledges. **We are setting out a pragmatic, costed and achievable plan that would make a real difference to graduates now, while also fixing the system for the long term.**

Today, our members passed our new policy to achieve that:

A Fairer Deal for Students and Graduates

We believe your background should never limit your ability to study. To make university life affordable again, we are calling for:

- **Reintroducing Maintenance Grants:** Reintroducing grants of £3,500 per year for the most disadvantaged students, ensuring they can graduate with £10,000 less debt.
- **Cutting Graduate Repayments:** Reversing Labour's threshold freeze to immediately put hundreds of pounds back into the pockets of graduates. Under our plans, lower and middle earning graduates could save up to £14,000 over the lifetime of their loan.
- **Debt Write-offs for Public Service:** Writing off portions of student debt for those who commit 10 years of service in key public service roles.
- **Ending "Moving the Goalposts":** Establishing an independent watchdog to stop governments from making retrospective, unfair changes to loan terms.

Securing the Future of the Sector

Universities need stability to innovate. To protect the financial health of the sector and boost the UK's research power, our policy includes:

- **Reversing Damaging Tax Hikes:** Scrapping the National Insurance rise and the international student levy that are currently draining university budgets.
- **A “Unified Tertiary” Approach:** Bridging the gap between Further Education and Higher Education so colleges and universities can share facilities and co-deliver courses.
- **Doubling Degree Apprenticeships:** Specifically in areas with skills shortages, with 50% of places reserved for students from low-income households.
- **Regional Innovation Centres:** Creating a national network of research hubs to ensure every region benefits from university-industry collaboration.

Read our new policy in full

Driving Global Innovation

We want to empower the next generation of entrepreneurs. Our plan would reform visa rules to allow PhD students to found startups during their studies and quintuple “proof of concept” funding to £200 million to help turn academic research into successful British businesses.

This is a bold and deliverable plan to ease the cost-of-living pressure on graduates today, while building a system that is sustainable for universities and fair for the students who study in them.

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[Revitalising Town Centres and High](#)

Streets

Town centres and high streets are the beating heart of communities up and down the country. They are the places where we connect, shop, and take pride in where we live. But for too long, they have been allowed to fall into disrepair – blighted by empty shops, cracked pavements, and anti-social behaviour.

The former Conservative Government's economic mismanagement, and a lack of vision now from Labour, have left our local businesses struggling with unfair taxes and soaring energy costs.

Liberal Democrats have a plan to breathe life back into our town centres.

Today, our members passed a comprehensive new policy to revitalise our high streets, support local entrepreneurs and make our shared spaces safe and sustainable.

Boosting Local Business and Cutting Costs

Our high streets cannot thrive if shops sit empty and small businesses are taxed out of existence. We are calling for immediate action to lower the barriers for local traders:

- **An Emergency VAT Cut:** A temporary cut in VAT from 20% to 15% for hospitality, visitor accommodation, and attractions to boost footfall and help families with the cost of living.
- **Business Rates Reform:** Replacing unfair business rates with a Commercial Landowner Levy to shift the tax burden from struggling tenants to commercial landowners, to stop penalising productive business investment and use land and buildings more efficiently.
- **Cracking Down on “Ghost” Landlords:** Requiring overseas landlords to provide UK contact details and closing loopholes that allow units to be leased to shell companies.
- **An “Out of Town” Levy:** Ensuring large-scale out-of-town developments contribute to a fund that reinvests directly into our high streets.

Creating Spaces People Love

A successful town centre must be more than just a place to shop; it must be a place to belong. Our plan focuses on design, culture, and community:

- **Community Hubs:** Making it easier to convert vacant shops into community spaces without bogged-down planning rules.
- **High Street Culture & Community Fund:** Partnering with the Arts Council to provide five-year grants for community-led cultural initiatives and local events.
- **Community Investment Schemes:** A “High Streets Back Home” scheme allowing local people to invest directly in their community – by supporting community asset purchases, restoring heritage buildings or backing local enterprise space.
- **Homes Above Shops:** Encouraging the conversion of upper floors into quality housing to bring residents – and life – back to the heart of town.

Safe, Clean, and Accessible

No one wants to visit a high street where they don't feel secure. We are taking a zero-tolerance approach to the issues that drive shoppers away:

- **Tackling Organised Shoplifting:** Calling on the National Crime Agency to set up a dedicated unit to dismantle the organised gangs targeting our local stores.
- **Smarter Design:** Investing in strategic lighting and CCTV to discourage anti-social behaviour.
- **Better Access:** Funding high-quality pedestrianisation projects and promoting active travel while reviewing parking charges to ensure they support, rather than hinder, evening and weekend footfall.

Read our new policy in full

Liberal Democrats are committed to building town centres that inspire pride for generations to come. It is time to stop ignoring the decline of our high streets and breathe new life into them as vibrant hubs for the future.

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Preserving Trial by Jury

The right to a trial by jury has been a cornerstone of our democracy for over 800 years.

But today, that fundamental right is under threat.

The former Conservative Government left our criminal justice system in a state of total dysfunction. Now, the Labour Government is taking a sledgehammer to the principle of jury trials instead of tackling the real problem: inefficiency. Their proposal to replace juries with judge-only trials for many offences is a short-sighted mistake that risks permanently damaging public trust in our courts.

Liberal Democrats are standing up to protect trial by jury.

Today, our members passed a clear plan to tackle the court backlogs without scrapping juries:

- **Protect the Right to a Jury:** Immediately abandon plans to expand judge-only trials and preserve the right to a jury.
- **Boost Court Productivity:** Implement an evidence-based strategy to reduce backlogs, including a “two trials a day” model in courtrooms across the country – a system proven during the pandemic to increase court productivity.
- **Fix Broken Infrastructure:** Cancel planned real-terms cuts to the justice budget and invest in repairing underused court buildings so they can be used effectively.
- **Renegotiate Court Contracts:** Tackle the failures in private contracts, such as prisoner transport, which currently cause 1 in 4 trials to be cancelled or delayed at the last minute.
- **Prioritise Victims:** Deliver a system where victims aren’t left in limbo for years, ensuring evidence remains fresh and cases don’t collapse due to unnecessary delays.

Read our new policy in full

By focusing on common-sense efficiencies – like making better use of underused buildings and addressing the 20% drop in court productivity seen

since 2016 – we can deliver the swift justice victims deserve while keeping our most sacred legal protections intact.

Trial by jury works. 6 in 10 people express confidence in jury verdicts, compared to just 4 in 10 for the court system more generally. **Removing juries won't just fail to clear the backlog; it will alienate the public from the justice system itself.**

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[Driving Forward – Road to Access](#)

Learning to drive is more than just a rite of passage – it is a vital life skill. For many young people, a driving licence is the road to economic freedom, education, and independence.

But after years of Conservative mismanagement and continued inaction under Labour, the road to independence has become a dead end.

Average waiting times for driving tests have spiralled to over 20 weeks, with some learners waiting half a year just for a slot. This scarcity of test slots has enabled bots and resellers to snap up bookings and sell them back to desperate learners at inflated prices.

Combined with soaring average annual insurance premiums of over £2,000 and lesson costs exceeding £1,500, we are facing a crisis where too many are being prevented from learning to drive because of their income or where they live.

Today, Liberal Democrat members passed a new plan to clear the backlogs, end the rip-offs, and get the next generation moving:

- **Slash the Test Backlog:** Provide urgent investment to the DVSA to recruit and retain more examiners and expand test centre capacity in underserved and rural areas.
- **Launch a 'Young Drivers Support Fund':** Establish a national bursary scheme to subsidise lessons and test fees for low-income and disabled learners.
- **Ban the Booking Bots:** Implement identity-linked bookings and anti-bot protections to stop third-party touts from exploiting learners.
- **Fix the Insurance Rip-off:** Launch a formal review into car insurance for under-25s to improve pricing transparency and limit unfair age-based

price hikes.

- **Modernise Training:** Update the driving test to ensure learners gain real-world experience in night-time driving, motorways, and adverse weather.

Read our new policy in full

By helping young people get to work and study we are breaking down the barriers to opportunity.

For too many, the nature of rural geography, or the lack of safe cycling and walking routes or reliable public transport, means being able to drive a car is a necessity, not a luxury. It's also a requirement for many jobs. We will continue to champion better active travel and public transport, but we cannot allow a broken testing system and predatory pricing to stall the lives of young people.

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[Protecting Children Online](#)

Tech companies have for far too long treated children as data to be mined rather than young people to be protected. They have let harmful content roam free on their sites from perpetuating negative body image to amplifying extreme and violent content. They have built addictive algorithms designed to keep children endlessly doom-scrolling at the expense of their mental health.

The Government's response to this has been disappointing. Rather than taking firm action, they are giving themselves the power to potentially act later, instead of implementing the sensible policies we have long called for. This includes failing to fully implement our proposal to immediately raise the age of data consent to 16, which would ban social media giants from harvesting children's data to feed them addictive, algorithmically generated content.

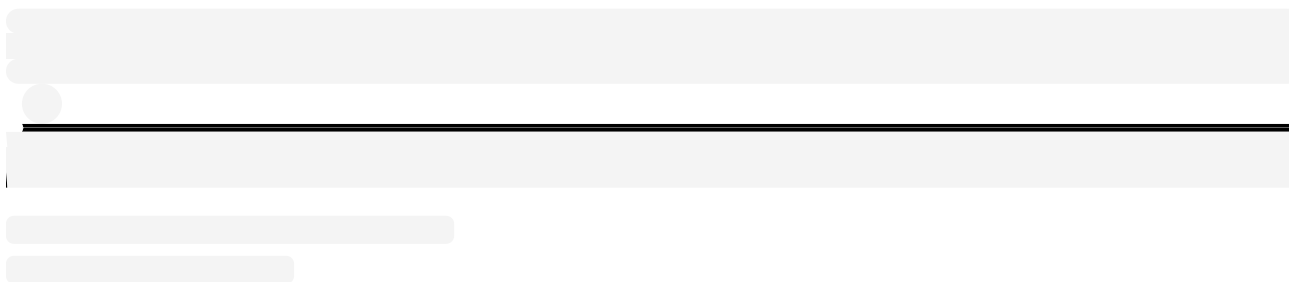
We also have serious concerns about how much power this Bill puts into the hands of just one person. As it stands, a single government minister could decide which social media platforms to ban using secondary legislation, which bypasses full parliamentary scrutiny. We raised the very real concern that a

future government of any political stripe could use these sweeping powers to control or categorise platforms without proper oversight.

For the campaigners, charities, and thousands of parents crying out for change, the Government's plan simply isn't good enough.



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That is why we put party politics aside and voted for a cross-party amendment to ban harmful social media for under-16s. This was not an endorsement of the Conservative approach; it was a rejection of the Government's current, inadequate plans. By voting this way, we are telling the Government to think again, return to the table, and listen to our calls for a smart, future-proof strategy that is led by evidence, not the whims of a single individual.

Ahead of the debate, **we also tabled our own amendment to advocate for a film-style age rating for online platforms, including social media.** This would mean platforms would be required to age-gate content at an appropriate level according to a new Ofcom framework looking at the addictiveness of their platform design, the impact on children's mental health, and the harmfulness of the content they host. The default age for social media would be 16, and the burden would be on Big Tech to prove their platforms are safe before that rating could be lowered. For sites hosting violence or pornography, the age would be set even higher.

Although our approach, **supported by over 40 children's charities like the NSPCC,** was not selected this time, we are not giving up. As this Bill continues through Parliament, we will keep fighting for a common-sense approach to online safety that puts the wellbeing of children above everything else.

Munira Wilson MP

Spokesperson for Education, Children and Families

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