

How do election 2015 party manifestos measure up to a Plan F for a caring economy?

At the time of the budget in March, the Women's Budget Group and the Scottish Women's Budget Group launched Plan F – a feminist economic strategy for a caring and sustainable economy that would benefit the majority of people and reverse the damage caused by austerity. The Plan sets out the policies required to achieve such a caring and sustainable economy and how those policies can be funded.

Plan F's policies are:

- Reverse cuts to public services and social security spending that have particularly adverse effects on women, such as the 'bedroom tax' and household benefit cap.
- Reform Universal Credit to provide an adequate independent income for all over the life course, by ensuring that women with employed partners gain from earning and that not all the money goes to one person in a household.
- Borrow to invest in social infrastructure – public services providing care, health, education and training – as well as physical infrastructure, such as renewable energy and environmentally friendly public transport
- Strengthen workers' rights throughout the economy, including the terms and conditions of work of the paid workforce, both directly employed and subcontracted, who staff the social infrastructure, and raise the national minimum wage to a level that ensures a decent living.
- Ensure access to high quality affordable care through care that is both publicly funded and publicly provided
- Improve support for people – currently mainly women – who provide unpaid care in families and communities. We need a social security system that promotes fairer sharing of care and its costs.
- Increase investment in social housing and insulating homes
- Paying for Plan F by:
 - o cancelling any replacement for Trident
 - o reversing tax reductions introduced since 2010: reductions in duties on fuel and alcohol; rises in the Personal Income Tax threshold; introduction of transferable tax allowances and corporation tax cuts
 - o taking effective action on tax debt, avoidance and evasion

To implement Plan F, the government would need to develop a very different approach to the economy, and the imminent election provides the opportunity to make such a shift. Now that all the main parties have published their election manifestos, we can try to determine how far their promises match up to the proposals set out in Plan F.

WBG members with relevant expertise have examined the manifestos of six main parties - Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Greens, SNP and UKIP - and extracted from their pages those elements that relate to the policies in Plan F. These are described below in a straightforward way, identifying which party/parties offer the best chance of working towards the goals of Plan F.

Reverse cuts to public services and social security spending that have particularly adverse effects on women, such as the 'bedroom tax' and household benefit cap.

Only the Greens and the SNP are explicitly anti-austerity, though the SNP's plan to spend an additional 0.5% per annum on investment is relatively modest. The Greens plan a radical expansion of the role of the state by increasing public spending to 45% of GDP by 2020 (in contrast to the Coalition government's plan to reduce this to 36%).

Labour will also increase spending on investment, but will aim to have a surplus by the end of the next parliament on current spending. The Lib Dems reject an emphasis on spending cuts as the main mechanism for reducing the deficit. They will wait to boost investment in public services until they judge current spending to be in balance over the cycle (projected to be in 2017/8), then promise investment in key public services and infrastructure, including in public sector workers' pay.

The Conservatives aim to cut spending overall, both investment and current, by £30bn over the next two years. UKIP will boost spending on NHS and social care, but will fund this by cuts elsewhere, notably through abolishing contributions to EU budget, cutting foreign aid, reducing funding to local authorities (through reviewing the Barnett formula) and scrapping the high-speed rail HS2.

Both Labour and the Conservatives say they will protect spending on health, education and international development. Neither gives any detail on where the other departmental cuts will fall.

Social Security spending

The Conservatives aim to reduce "welfare" spending by a further £12billion in the first two years of the next parliament. Approximately £2 billion of this cut will come through reducing the household benefit cap to £23,000 and freezing many working-age benefits for two more years, including child benefit, and stopping automatic entitlement to housing benefit for 18-21 year olds on JSA. There is no detail on where the remaining cuts to social security will fall.

Labour will also freeze child benefit for two years and reduce the household benefit cap by setting it regionally to reflect local conditions. The Lib Dems will also retain the cap but will continue to set it at around average family income. They will review the sanctions procedures and reject using it as a tool to reduce expenditure.

The SNP will support an urgent review of assessment of disability benefits, conditionality and the sanctions regime and an overhaul of Work Capability Assessments. They will oppose further cuts in child benefit and tax credits and will not support lengthy freeze on working-age benefits. The Greens will also review the household benefit cap and the benefits sanctions regime.

UKIP would limit the payment of child benefit to two children for new claimants.

The Conservatives will retain the bedroom tax. All other parties will abolish it.

Reform Universal Credit to provide an adequate independent income for all over the life course, by ensuring that women with employed partners gain from earning and that not all the money goes to one person in a household.

The Conservatives have no plans for reforming Universal Credit and will continue implementing their plans for its introduction. Labour will pause and review Universal Credit but still supports the principle of it. The Lib Dems will review it to address any issues regarding 'cliff edges' (i.e. sharp drop in benefits as income from employment increases) and incentivise increased working hours for all claimants (the current plans for UC are predicted to leave many women unable to afford to take employment because their earnings would be clawed back by means testing). The SNP will halt the roll out of Universal Credit.

The Greens would, in the long run, replace Universal Credit, pensions, child benefit and personal tax allowances with a basic citizen's income to remove rather than entrench the difference between being in and out of work. This basic income would be paid at a lower rate for children and a higher rate for those who are retired. It would be paid to individuals rather than households so that second earners would not have benefits clawed back due to their partner's higher earnings. This approach would aim to provide an independent income over the life course. Most benefits except disability allowance and housing benefit would then be abolished.

Borrow to invest in social infrastructure – public services providing care, health, education and training – as well as physical infrastructure such as renewable energy and environmentally friendly public transport

No party explicitly mentions investing in social infrastructure, although explicitly several manifestos have comments relevant to social infrastructure.

Health and Social Care

The Conservatives would add £8bn a year to NHS England's expenditure, integrating it with social care (with no explicit funds for social care). They promise 7 days a week access to GPs with a corresponding increase in staffing to maintain quality of care.

Labour would invest £2.5bn "more than the Conservatives". It would build the NHS "so that it has time to care", funding 8,000 more GPs, 20,000 more nurses and 3,000 more midwives. UKIP would fund the same numbers of extra staff. They would invest an extra £1.5 billion into mental health and dementia services over the next five years.

The Lib Dems would deliver the £8 billion that NHS leaders say are needed to keep NHS England strong, with money for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland too. They would also invest £500m to transform mental health care, with waiting time standards to match those in physical health care.

The SNP would invest in the NHS and increase spending on it across the UK by £24 billion by 2020/1, £9.5 billion above inflation. They would also vote against further privatisation of NHS England.

The Greens would "end the current funding gap" in the NHS and provide an annual increase in funding to allow for ageing.

UKIP would integrate health and social care, bringing both under the control of the NHS. They pledge an increase in social care funding of £5.2 billion between 2015 and 2020.

Education

The Conservatives would increase spending on school education in line with the number of pupils; retain free meals to all infants; protect the pupil premium in cash terms. They would train an extra 17,500 maths and physics teachers by 2020.

Labour would protect the entire education budget (in England) 'from early years through to post-16 education', and cap class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds. They would increase teacher qualifications, and support head teachers to improve school leadership. They propose an overhaul of vocational education, and to cut university tuition fees from £9000 to £6000. The Lib Dems would also protect the education budget in real terms from the early years to age 19. Every child to be taught by qualified teachers.

The Greens would invest in free education for all, including at university level, as they recognise that education is for the common good. Student grants would be provided and in the longer term they would get the basic income for some of their living costs. They would also restore the Education Maintenance Allowance for 16-17 year olds and provide apprenticeships for all those who want them.

The SNP supports reducing university tuition fees in the UK and the continuation of no tuition fees in Scotland. They want an expansion of the Education Maintenance Allowance to an extra 22,000 school pupils and students.

UKIP pledges to enhance educational standards by supporting teachers, cutting assessment, monitoring and paperwork. UKIP supports the expansion of grammar schools, as well as vocational schools with links to industry. It would limit, rather than expand, university education.

Physical Infrastructure, renewable energy and environmentally friendly public transport

The Conservatives plan to invest £100bn in physical infrastructure (rail, roads and broadband and flood defences) over the next Parliament. Labour will set up an independent National Infrastructure Commission to assess how best to meet Britain's infrastructure needs. They also pledge ambitious domestic carbon reduction targets, including a legal target to remove the carbon from our electricity supply by 2030, and a major drive for energy efficiency, and investment in cycling.

The Lib Dems have a strong emphasis on investing in physical infrastructure critical to Britain's ability to trade internationally – low-carbon energy, offshore and subsea technology – and will invest in major transport improvements and infrastructure.

The Greens focus on green investment and restoration of the public sector – e.g. renationalising the railways. They would allow Local Authorities to borrow to invest in social housing and set up a Green Investment Bank for investment in sustainable and efficient energy projects – renewable energy and home insulation, especially in fuel poor areas. They would also set up a state earnings related pension scheme whose funds could be used for public sector investment and they would end private finance initiative (PFI) schemes. They would also end investment in large road building. Instead they would promote cheaper public transport and encourage cycling and walking.

The SNP will push the UK government to adopt the 'ambitious' targets on carbon reduction and would introduce a moratorium on fracking and maximise offshore wind power. They would maintain HS2 and extend it to Scotland and the north of England. Both Labour and the Conservatives would also retain HS2, though Labour would scrutinise its costs, and freeze commuter rail fares.

Strengthen workers' rights throughout the economy, including the terms and conditions of work of the paid workforce, both directly employed and subcontracted, who staff the social infrastructure, and raise the national minimum wage to a level that ensures a decent living.

Workers' rights

The Conservatives would legislate to restrict strike actions. UKIP would use leaving the EU to escape EU employment regulations. The Greens would revive the role of democratic trade unions and the right to take industrial action.

Labour would ban 'exploitative' zero-hours contracts. The Conservatives don't mention them but "would tackle illegal working and exploitation" through tougher labour market regulation. The SNP would support efforts to end zero-hours contracts within the next parliament.

Labour would abolish Employment Tribunal Fees. The Lib Dems would review fees to ensure they are not a barrier. The Greens would make industrial tribunals affordable. The Conservatives and SNP don't mention the issue.

National Minimum Wage/Living wage

The Conservatives would raise the NMW to £8 at the end of 2020. Labour would do so by October 2019. The SNP would increase the NMW to £8.70 by 2020. UKIP would enforce the NMW (no mention of raising it).

The Lib Dems would ask the Low Pay Commission to look at ways of raising the National Minimum Wage, without damaging employment opportunities. They would also improve enforcement action and clamp down on abuses by employers seeking to avoid paying the minimum wage by reviewing practices such as unpaid internships. They would establish an independent review to consult on how to set a fair Living Wage across all sectors and pay this Living Wage in all central government departments and their agencies from April 2016, and encourage other public sector employers to do the same.

Labour would introduce 'Make Work Pay' contracts to provide tax rebates for firms that become Living Wage employers. The Greens would legislate to have a living wage for all at £10 per hour by 2020.

Equality

On equal pay, the Conservatives would aim to reduce the gender wage gap further and the SNP want to see early action on equal pay audits for large companies and Labour and Conservatives would require large companies to publish their gender pay gap.

The Greens would cut the extent of inequality by limiting the overall dispersion of earnings within an organisation to 10:1 although this would be through tax incentives (higher tax on higher pay and removal of some tax reliefs), not regulation (except for raising the minimum wage).

Ensure access to high quality affordable care through care that is both publicly funded and publicly provided

Childcare

The Conservatives are committed to 30 hours free childcare for 3 and 4 year olds whose parents are in employment, although it is not clear how it will be funded. Labour has a commitment to increase free hours to 25 for the same children, funded by a bank levy. The SNP will do the same and with increased access for 'eligible'

two year olds. Labour will reopen Sure Start centres, closed through cuts to their funding, and aim to double the level of paternity leave pay.

The Lib Dems have a different offer, of 20 hours free childcare a week for all parents with children aged from two to four years, and all working parents from the end of paid parental leave (nine months) to two years. They will prioritise 15 hours per week for those currently receiving no free childcare (most of those under two years old). They will support Local Authorities in providing Children's Centres.

The Greens would introduce free but voluntary universal early education and childcare service for all pre-school children from birth although it is not clear for how many hours per week. The emphasis would be on the child and education rather than just to allow women to work. They would ensure that childcare was provided by a well-trained highly educated workforce.

UKIP would extend the current childcare vouchers and tax-free schemes to informal, non-Ofsted childminders. They would also offer wrap-around schooling 8am-6pm and give parents easy access to emergency childcare through their local authority.

Social Care

The Conservatives would cap charges for residential social care (so that no-one is forced to sell their home), and protect people from unlimited costs through developing very serious care needs. The Greens would provide free social care for the elderly – as well as measures to combat loneliness.

Labour proposes to cap the costs of care and prioritises improving the quality of care services. Their plans for care services in England include working with local authorities and care providers to end time-limited 15-minute visits and introducing year-of-care budgets to incentivise better care in the home.

Improve support for people – currently mainly women – who provide unpaid care in families and communities. We need a social security system that promotes fairer sharing of care and its costs.

The Conservatives would increase support for full-time unpaid carers but do not give any detail on amounts and funding.

Labour states that care is at the heart of their values and will bring together services for physical health, mental health and social care into a single system built around the individual. They propose a tax on properties worth over £2 million to help raise the £2.5 billion a year for an NHS Time to Care Fund and will repeal the Government's Health and Social Care Act. Concerned with quality of care for older people, Labour proposes to end time-limited 15 minute social care visits and recruit 5,000 new home-care workers to support people in their home. They recognise women's disproportionate role as unpaid carers and propose a duty on NHS organisations (in England) to identify carers to ensure they are linked in to appropriate support. The manifesto does not mention Carer's Allowance.

Proposals on Carer's Allowance from the other parties include the SNP commitment to increase its amount to the level of Jobseeker's Allowance while the LibDems aim to raise the amount that can be earned without losing the Carer's Allowance from £110 to £150 a week. The SNP proposes a form of Carer's leave and the Lib Dems propose to treat unpaid carers with more respect and give them more help and a £250 bonus. They would expand Shared Parental Leave with a 'use it or lose it' month for fathers, and introduce a right to paid leave for carers and consult on introducing five days' paid additional 'care leave' a year for carers who qualify for the Carer's

Allowance. The Greens would increase the Carer's Allowance by 50% with a legal right to take leave. Older carers, who would receive the citizens' pension, would be better supported. Foster carers would be paid a salary instead of an allowance. UKIP would also increase Carer's Allowance to match Jobseeker's Allowance. And they would give carers an additional five-day leave entitlement. They support current maternity and paternity rights, as well as adoption leave.

Community support

The Greens propose piloting Women's Centres, designed to provide a holistic approach to problems such as the lack of a job, of a place to live or an illness. They would be run by the voluntary sector, which will be given secure long-term core funding and if successful extended nationwide. They recognise that women have borne 75% of cuts and that they play a vital role in communities in filling caring gaps.

Labour will reopen Sure Start centres; the Lib Dems will support Local Authorities in providing Children's Centres. The Greens will replace Sure Start with free but voluntary universal early education and child care service for all pre-school children from birth. They too will provide Children's Centres for parents and their children under one. No mention of Sure Start centres by the Conservatives, SNP or UKIP.

Increase investment in social housing and insulating homes

The Conservatives will support building 200,000 new Starter Homes (for first-time buyers under 40) and a total of 275,000 affordable homes by 2020 and 10,000 new homes to rent at below market rates. However they will continue funding Help-to-Buy and Right-to-Buy policies that would reduce the stock of social housing. They would force Housing Associations to replace homes sold under the right-to-buy and create housing zones on brownfield sites (aiming for 95,000 new homes).

The Lib Dems focus on private homes, aiming at building 300,000 new homes per year and improving the rights of private tenants. UKIP doesn't mention social homes either but plans to build 1 million homes on brownfield sites by 2020 and bring empty homes back into use. Labour would build 200,000 new homes by 2020 and unlock a 'Future Homes Fund' by requiring that the billions of pounds saved in Help-to-Buy ISAs be invested in increasing housing supply. The SNP is committed to see 100,000 new homes built in the UK. The Greens are the only party explicitly focusing on a social housing building plan, with 500,000 social homes to be built for rent, and they would scrap the Help-to-Buy scheme.

The Lib Dems would ensure at least four million homes have improved insulation by 2020. They would also cut Council Tax by £100 for 10 years after home insulation, and ban landlords from letting out homes tenants cannot reasonably afford to heat. The Greens would provide a free nationwide retrofit insulation programme, concentrating on areas where fuel poverty is most serious. They would offer £5000 worth of free insulation or other energy efficient measure if insulation is up to standard. These would be funded by carbon taxes. UKIP by contrast would oppose green energy policies on the ground that these would raise energy prices.

Labour would make homes more energy efficient through a million interest free loans for energy home improvements in the next Parliament and supporting 200,000 low income households to stay warm through local authorities and community organisations. The SNP will support lower energy bills for consumers by funding the Energy Company Obligation through general taxation and not as a levy on energy bills and for new powers to make sure that energy companies pass on the benefits of lower prices to consumers.

Paying for Plan F

Cancel any replacement for Trident

Reverse tax reductions introduced since 2010: reductions in duties on fuel and alcohol; rises in the Personal Income tax threshold; introduction of transferable tax allowances and corporation tax cuts

Take effective action on tax debt, avoidance and evasion

Cancel any replacement for Trident

The SNP and the Greens would do so, but the Conservatives and UKIP want to renew it. Labour does not mention Trident explicitly but is committed to 'continuous at sea deterrent'. The Lib Dems would move from continuous at sea deterrence to regular sea patrols to step down the nuclear ladder progressively.

Reverse tax reductions introduced since 2010

Labour, the SNP and the Greens would all abolish the transferable tax allowance (TTA) that means that having a non- or low- earning married person reduces the tax paid by the earning spouse. By contrast, the Conservatives would increase the TTA to £1250 (in line with the rise in the PTA), UKIP to £1,500, while the Lib Dems don't mention it.

Both the Conservatives and the Lib Dems would pursue their costly tax give-away of increasing the personal tax allowance to £12,500. Both the Conservatives and the SNP would reduce taxes for higher earners by increasing the higher rate tax threshold to £50,000 during next Parliament (the SNP would do so 'cautiously').

The Lib Dems and the Conservatives are committed not to raise rates of personal income tax, national insurance contributions, corporation tax or VAT. Labour and the SNP would revert to the 50p additional tax rate for incomes over £150,000 and the Greens would raise it to 60p. UKIP is committed overall to low taxation while any commitment to increased public spending would be funded by savings from EU exit, cutting foreign aid, reviewing the Barnett formula and scrapping HS2.

The Conservatives would reduce pension tax relief for those with incomes above £150,000 although this would be used to pay for a reduction in inheritance tax. Labour would use funds from tax avoidance and reduction in pension tax relief to fund the university fees cuts. The Greens and the SNP are also committed to cut or review the pension tax relief but haven't allocated the funds to specific spending plans.

Only the Greens mention raising fuel and alcohol duties, or increasing corporation tax. The Greens would raise corporation tax to the level of other European countries and ring fence some of the resulting revenue for education. They would also increase duty on aviation fuel and raise tobacco and alcohol duties (reintroducing escalators abolished by the Coalition government). They would increase a range of taxes – so that revenues were 44% of GDP (1% less than their projected total spending – with the gap justified by the benefits that the investment would generate). They say their policies would result in a reduction in the current account deficit but this is not a specific aim. UKIP propose to use tax revenue from fracking to establish a 'Sovereign Wealth Fund' to pay for care for the elderly.

On alcohol taxation, the SNP look both ways to find a balance to protect Scotland's whisky industry and measures to address alcohol-related health problems.

Labour and the Greens have specific plans to fund each increase in spending. For example Labour would fund extra staff for the health service by a Mansion Tax on properties worth over £2 million, a levy on tobacco firms, and by tackling tax avoidance. The Greens also present a detailed overall costing plan. Other parties make similar

promises without always detailing where the extra spending would come from in this way. For example, the Conservatives have not said how they would fund their promise to train an extra 17,500 maths and physics teachers nor the additional free childcare hours.

Tackling tax debt, avoidance and evasion

All parties are committed to crack down on tax evasion and avoidance. The Lib Dems will limit the impact of deficit reduction on public services by raising taxes on banks, big businesses, the wealthy and polluters, and by bearing down on tax avoidance. Other parties will tackle tax avoidance too, but do not expect to raise as much revenue from this as the Lib Dems. The Conservatives would aim to raise just £5bn from it.

Conclusion: Have the parties moved any closer to a Plan F?

In sum, all parties offer something to contribute to Plan F, but there are big differences in their stance on austerity, whether they challenge the need for austerity, whether they will borrow to invest, and to invest in social infrastructure in particular. Parties also vary in their commitment to publicly provided (not just publicly funded) care services; labour rights and legislation to raise low wages; and whether and how funds might be raised through taxation.

Childcare is a prominent policy platform across all the parties, but not the full range of social care. Recognition of the contribution of unpaid care is another mixed bag with an increased focus on formal carers, but not so much on the care economy and the workers that sustain it.

Broadly speaking the Greens are the boldest when it comes to opposing austerity, and are prepared to raise taxation and borrow to fund developing a social infrastructure that would explicitly be provided by the public sector. The Conservatives propose to continue with tax give-aways and would cut spending the most. Labour and the Lib Dems make reducing the deficit in current spending a priority too, but are prepared to borrow to invest. They have cautious spending plans, but are both committed to reducing the attack on benefits and to rebalancing taxation. The SNP rejects austerity but its spending plans are not quantitatively very different from Labour's, though they are prepared to make more of a case for the public sector provision. UKIP would publicly fund more social services, though it is not clear whether, apart from the NHS, these would be publicly provided. Most of the funding would come from neither taxation nor borrowing, but from betting on savings from exiting the EU and restricting migration.

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The UK and Scottish Women's Budget Groups are independent voluntary organizations whose members include academics, trade unionists, and people who work for non-governmental organizations. They produce analysis of government spending plans, budgets and policies to promote a better understanding of the impact of government decision making on women and to improve the quality of that decision making so that public resources are allocated for the benefit of all.