

Women's Budget Group 2017 Election Manifesto

In March 2015, 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 set out the policies required to achieve such a caring and sustainable economy and how those policies can be funded. WBG has updated plan F to take account of policy changes since 2015.

Plan F's policies are:

- Reform social security to provide an adequate independent income for all over the life course, ensuring that women with employed partners gain from earning and that not all the money goes to one person in a household.
- Reverse the cuts to social security spending that have particularly adverse effects on women, including the 'bedroom tax', the household benefit cap, the two-child limit and the freeze on working-age benefits.
- 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.
- Reverse the cuts to public services that have particularly adverse effects on women, including on childcare, social care and violence against women services. Ensure access to high quality affordable care through care that is both publicly funded and publicly provided
- Strengthen workers' rights throughout the economy, including the terms and conditions of work of the public sector workforce, both directly employed and subcontracted and raise the national minimum wage to a level that ensures a decent living.
- Improve support for people – currently mainly women – who provide unpaid care in families and communities. We need a social security system that promotes a fairer sharing of care and its costs.
- Increase investment in social housing and insulating homes
- Promote equality throughout the economy, by strengthening equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation and the public sector equality duty. Require compliance for all receiving government contracts and ensure government carries out a gender impact assessment of all policy changes
- Ensure that equality is central to plans for a post Brexit society.
- Paying for Plan F by: cancelling any replacement for Trident, increasing taxation by making the tax system more progressive. In doing so, consider reversing all tax reductions introduced since

2010 including: reductions in duties on fuel and alcohol; rises in the Personal Income Tax threshold and the introduction of transferable tax allowances; corporation tax cuts, and taking effective action on tax debt, avoidance and evasion.

WBG members with relevant expertise have examined the manifestos of seven main parties - Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Greens, SNP, Women's Equality Party 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.

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

The Conservatives aim to 'Run the welfare system in accordance with the belief that work is the best route out of poverty, that work should always pay, and that the system should be fair to people in need of support and those who pay for it'. Their manifesto contains no plans for any significant changes to the social security policies of the 2015-17 Conservative Government. They would continue to roll out Universal Credit.

The Labour manifesto will review the whole Universal Credit system, including the two-child cap and work allowances. The Liberal Democrats will reverse cuts to work allowances. The SNP will halt the roll out of Universal Credit and reverse cuts to the work allowance. The SNP supports the splitting of Universal Credit payments between partners in couples (this has already been adopted in Scotland). None of the other parties mentions the problem of paying Universal Credit to a single bank account.

Labour commits to a serious review of the whole system with the aim of changing the social security system to one that 'supports and enables people to work where they can and does not demonise those who cannot'.

The Liberal Democrats aims to support people to work and argues that 'balancing the books on the backs of the poor and disabled and demonising people who claim benefits is neither acceptable nor responsible'.

The Green Party would 'redress benefits injustice with a social security system that gives everyone the confidence they will get support when they need it, including disabled people'.

The Women's Equality Party aims to 'work towards a social security system that aims at fairer sharing of the costs of caring and provides an adequate income for all over the life course'.

The SNP say that 'Social security should be there for all of us in times of need. It is part of what holds us together as a society. Social security is a safety net that we all pay into when times are good, in the expectation that it is there for us when we find ourselves in difficult financial or personal circumstance. We will protect the principles that have underpinned the social security system since its foundations.'

UKIP says it will end 'unfair benefit cuts' particularly for disabled people, but also 'crack down on benefit fraud' and support the deficit reduction plans of the previous government.

Reverse the cuts to social security spending that have particularly adverse effects on women, including the 'bedroom tax', the household benefit cap, the two-child limit and the freeze on working-age benefits.

Working age benefits

Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, the Women's Equality Party, the SNP and UKIP all commit to removing the unpopular 'bedroom tax'. Labour, Liberal Democrats and the Green Party would also all reverse the decision to cut housing benefit for those under 21. Only the Liberal Democrats have committed to raising Local Housing Allowance to the level of average rents in the area.

Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Green Party, SNP and Women's Equality Party all criticise the two-child cap, which will limit the child element of benefit and tax credits to two children for any children born after April this year. This has been widely condemned by campaigners, particularly because of the 'rape clause', which exempts third and subsequent children who have been conceived as a result of rape from the cap, but requires women to provide evidence that they have reported being raped, despite the fact that only a small minority of women who are raped report it.

The Liberal Democrats and the SNP commit to reversing the freeze on benefit levels. None of the parties mention the overall household benefit cap.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats both propose changes to disability benefits including reforms to the assessment process and increases to ESA. UKIP pledges to protect disability benefits and to reform the Work Capability Assessment process.

Pensioner benefits

The Conservative party would maintain the 'triple lock' for pensions until 2020, guaranteeing pensions would increase by earnings, prices or 2%, (whichever is highest). After 2020 this would be replaced by a 'double lock' guarantee based on earnings or prices.

Labour, Liberal Democrats, SNP and UKIP would maintain the triple lock. The Green party commit to 'redress pension injustice with a pensions system for everyone and action to enable older people to continue to be active members of society'.

The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats would introduce a means test for Winter Fuel Payments. Labour, the SNP and UKIP would maintain universal Winter Fuel Payments (the SNP would extend payments to families with disabled children).

The Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, UKIP and SNP all commit to maintaining universal free transport passes for pensioners.

Labour and the SNP commit to compensation and transitional protection for women born in the 1950s who have been affected by changes in state pension age (the WASPI women).

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

All the main parties are committed to increasing investment in physical infrastructure including transport, broadband, hospitals and schools. WBG welcomes this investment, but believes that it should not be limited to construction. The provision of health, education and care services themselves should count as part of the infrastructure alongside the buildings in which they take place.

All parties, except the Conservatives, are relaxing the previous Cameron government fiscal rule that aimed for an overall budget balance, and the Conservatives are again delaying when they believe this aim will be achieved until the middle of the next decade. The Liberal Democrats and Labour both explicitly accept the need to borrow for infrastructure investment. The Conservatives are proposing to invest in infrastructure but remain vague as to whether this is additional funding above their existing National Productivity Investment.

The Women's Equality Party has adopted the WBG argument that infrastructure investment should include investment in social as well as physical infrastructure, committing to 'match investment in physical infrastructure with investment in social infrastructure by allocating half of the Chancellor's infrastructure investment fund to social infrastructure, and double the fund'.

Although only the Women's Equality Party names investment in care, health, education and training services as infrastructure investment, all the parties say that they will spend more on these services (see below)

Reverse the cuts to public services that have particularly adverse effects on women, including on childcare, social care and violence against women services. Ensure access to high quality affordable care through care that is both publicly funded and publicly provided

Health

All the parties are committed to a publicly-funded NHS which is free at the point of use but have different interpretations of what it should entail in practice. The Lib Dems will invest in priority on preventative public health, primary care, social care and mental health care, the latter is accepted as an important issue by the other two parties too.

The Conservatives would inject £8bn in real terms over the Parliament while the Liberal Democrats would inject £6bn (on health and social care), funded by a 1p rate increase in the NICs. Labour would increase funding by £5bn in 2022, which means £5bn in that year as opposed to over the 5-year period (funded by tax rises on the top 5%), a significantly larger commitment than the other two main parties.

All three parties propose a better linking between health and social care services.

The Green Party commits to closing 'the NHS funding gap' but does not specify by how much. UKIP promises an additional £9billion a year by 2021/2, funded by cutting overseas aid. The SNP states that their policy of ending austerity 'would enable the UK government to increase investment in the NHS far beyond current plans'.

The Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, SNP and UKIP commit to training more staff. Labour, Liberal Democrats and UKIP will reinstate bursaries for nurse training.

Social Care

All the parties recognise the crisis in social care and are proposing additional funding for care but have different views on how this should be achieved. Labour and the Liberal Democrats recognise this is an issue for which cross-party support should be sought.

Labour proposes a National Care Service, free at the point of use for those most in need. In the meantime, they will commit additional funding in each year of the Parliament to plug the funding gap from the 2015 levels, estimated to be about £2bn by 2020 (although the 2015 level was already too low). They will also commit an additional £3bn a year while the whole social care funding system is being reviewed.

The Liberal Democrats will also invest in social care but it is not clear how much as their £6bn plan includes investment in health care (and especially mental health). Both parties commit to a cap on social care costs.

The Conservatives propose that the value of people's homes should be included in the means test for domiciliary care (as it currently is for residential care) but increasing the threshold to assets over £100,000. Following widespread criticism the Conservatives then announced that the costs of care would be capped, but have not announced the level at which the cap will be set. The Dilnot report accepted by the Cameron government set it at £72,000 annually.

The SNP will spend an additional £1.7bn in Scotland on health and social care over the parliament. The Women's Equality Party will 'ensure access to high quality affordable care' that is both publically funded and publically provided and integrate health and social care. UKIP will provide an additional £2bn a year for social care by 2021/22 from cuts to the overseas aid budget.

Childcare

The Conservatives will continue with the planned roll-out of 30 hours a week free childcare during term time for working parents.

The Liberal Democrats will offer 15 hours a week free childcare for children of working parents aged 9 months to 2 years with the aim of increasing it to 30 hours. Under their plans children aged 2-4 will be entitled to 30 hours' free childcare.

Labour is promising 15 hours a week free childcare for all children aged 2-4 and 30 hours for children aged 2-4 with a working parent. They are offering subsidised childcare for any additional hours (up to 35 hours a week) for all working parents with children over one. They also commit to improving staff training and pay. Labour costs this plan at £5.3bn a year by 2022.

The Green Party is offering free universal early education and childcare for all children. SNP will expand childcare to 30 hours a week for all 3 and 4-year-old and vulnerable 2 year olds. UKIP is offering a 'far reaching review' of childcare to deregulate and simplify the childcare system.

The Women's Equality Party is offering free universal childcare from nine months, centrally funded on a not for profit basis. Their aim is to develop a fully qualified workforce with pay-scales that are commensurate with the importance and value of pre-school care and early years' care.

WBG welcomes Labour's plan to shift subsidies from cash to parents to direct subsidies to providers, and the move by both Liberal Democrats and Labour to require better qualifications and pay higher

wages above the minimum wage (note that the Tories implicitly will pay higher wages as they are raising the National Living Wage but see below). Labour has costed its plan to include an additional £5.3bn a year by 2022. The others haven't costed their plans.

Labour is the only party that commits to stopping the cuts to Sure Start centres.

Education and Training

All the parties commit to additional investment in education and training.

The Conservatives promise an increase in the schools' budget by £4bn by 2022, representing an increase in cash terms, but not in real terms. They plan to expand free schools and promote grammar schools. They will end the policy of free school meals for infant school pupils, returning to a system of means testing and instead offer free breakfasts to all primary school children.

Labour will introduce a cradle to grave National Education Service (to include childcare/early years education, schools, further and higher education and adult education) that will be free at the point of use. This will include an additional £6.3bn invested in schools, free, life-long further education, reinstating the Education Maintenance Allowance and ending university tuition fees.

The Liberal Democrats will protect the education budget in real terms per pupil from early years to 19 at a cost of £7bn over the parliament. They will scrap the extension of grammar schools and extend free school meals to all primary school pupils. On higher education, they will reintroduce maintenance grants for the poorest students and establish a review of higher education finance.

The Green Party will increase real term spending per pupils in schools, bring academies and free schools into the local authority system. They will restore the Education Maintenance Allowance and abolish tuition fees.

The SNP will resist 'market driven education reforms' in England and Wales and continue to invest in and reform school education in Scotland.

UKIP will fund all schools according to a single formula and introduce a grammar school in every town. They will scrap tuition fees for STEM students provided that graduates work in their discipline and pay UK taxes for at least five years after graduation, or work in the NHS for ten years for medical students.

The Women's Equality party will focus on making equality a priority in the curriculum and teacher training.

Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Green party all emphasise the need for additional investment in skills training, with a particular focus on increasing the number of apprenticeships.

Violence Against Women services

The Labour manifesto promises a Violence Against Women Commissioner who would 'provide stable central funding for women's refuges and rape crisis centres and encourage sharing of best practice between local authorities'.

The Conservatives also promise a Commissioner for domestic violence and abuse (rather than all forms of violence against women) to 'stand up for victims and survivors, monitor the response to domestic violence and abuse and to hold the police and the criminal justice system to account'. They promise a review of funding for refuges, but make no commitment on rape crisis centres.

The Liberal Democrats have promised funding for a national rape crisis helpline ‘with increased opening hours and advertisement’, but make no commitments on funding of local rape crisis centres or refuge provision.

The Green party manifesto includes a commitment to reversing cuts to abuse support services and to fund BME women-led services to tackle ‘honour-based’ violence and FGM.

The Women’s Equality party promise to ‘rebuild the funding model so that all women and girls who experience male violence and abuse have access to specialist support and advocacy services in their community that are for and led by women, including BAME and disabled women’. They commit to replacing competitive tendering with a model of three year grants and will introduce a statutory duty on government to provide access to services for victims and survivors of violence.

However, none of the manifestos provide any detail on proposed levels of funding, making it impossible to judge whether their various commitments will be sufficient to close the existing funding gap.

Strengthen workers’ rights throughout the economy, including the terms and conditions of work of the public sector workforce, both directly employed and subcontracted and raise the national minimum wage to a level that ensures a decent living.

Public sector pay freeze

Labour, Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, Women’s Equality Party and SNP are all committed to ending the public sector pay freeze. UKIP will lift the cap for NHS front line workers earning under £35,000 a year. The Conservative manifesto does not mention the pay cap.

National Living Wage

All the manifestos include proposals to increase the National Living Wage, which is currently lower than the level of the actual living wage (the Minimum Wage was re-branded as the National Living Wage, but not increased to the level set by the Living Wage Foundation).

The Conservatives would increase the National Living Wage to 60% of median earnings by 2020 and then by the rate of median earnings. This is likely still to leave the National Living Wage lower than the actual living wage. Labour, SNP and the Green Party would raise the National Living Wage to the level of the actual living wage (expected to be at least £10 an hour by 2020). The Liberal Democrats would raise the National Living wage to one that ensures a decent standard of living, but does not detail what that is. They would set up a commission to set a genuine living wage. UKIP would enforce the minimum and living wage.

Workers’ rights

Labour offers a 20-point plan on strengthening workers’ rights and conditions. Among other aspects, they will enforce equal rights for all types of contracts, scrap zero-hour contracts, strengthen unions role and coverage, increase the period for claiming maternity discrimination and scrap employment tribunal fees.

The Liberal Democrats will also scrap employment tribunal fees and ensure zero-hour contracts are not abusive but won’t scrap them altogether. Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats will

make sure people working in the gig economy are protected (based on the outcomes of the Taylor review).

The Green Party will work towards a four day working week and scrap zero hours contracts while UKIP will tighten up rules on zero hours contracts and limit their use.

Pay gap

On the pay gap the main focus of the manifestos is requiring companies to publish data on the pay gap. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats would require companies with more than 250 employees to publish data on the pay gap. The SNP would reduce this threshold to 150 employees and the Green party to 50. Labour do not specify the size of company that would be obliged to publish data, but would ensure compliance with gender pay auditing for all large employers.

Increase investment in social housing and insulating homes

All the parties are committed to building more housing. The Conservatives set a target of 1 million new homes by 2020. Labour's target is 1 million homes by 2022, removing restrictions on councils building homes and begin the biggest council building programme for at least 30 years, building at least 100,000 new council and housing association homes a year for genuinely affordable rent or sale by the end of the parliament. The Liberal Democrat target is 300,000 houses a year by 2022. The Greens aim for 100,000 social housing by 2022. SNP will build 50,000 new affordable homes in Scotland of which 35,000 will be social housing.

Promote equality throughout the economy, by strengthening equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation and the public sector equality duty. Require compliance for all receiving government contracts and ensure government carries out a gender impact assessment of all policy changes

Only Labour and the Women's Equality Party committed to systematically gender audit all their policies prior to announcement. However, Labour does not provide a gender impact assessment of their manifesto. Labour will also reinstate the public sector equality duties and seek to extend them to the private sector. It would also strengthen the EHRC's powers and independence to ensure that it can challenge all forms of discrimination.

Ensure that equality is central to plans for a post Brexit society

There is clear division between the parties about the form that a new trading agreement with the EU should take. The Conservative Manifesto rules out membership of both the Single Market and the Customs Union in favour of a 'a deep and special partnership including a comprehensive free trade and customs agreement', although it also argues that 'no deal is better than a bad deal'. Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party all favour remaining in the Single Market with both the Liberal Democrats and the Greens promising a second referendum at the end of the Brexit negotiations, which would include the option of staying in the EU.

It is highly unlikely that the 'comprehensive free trade and customs agreement' promised by the Conservatives will give the UK the same terms for trade with the EU as the Single Market. Even a 'good deal' is likely to result on some sectors facing tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade with the

EU. The 'no deal' option would mean trading on World Trade Organisation terms, which would lead to a significant increase in tariffs and other barriers. There is general agreement among economists that leaving the Single Market would damage the UK economy, with 'no deal' leading to significant damage. The Conservative manifesto emphasises the 'unique opportunities' that the UK has 'to forge a new set of trade and investment relationships around the world'. However, it appears unlikely that trade agreements with third countries can make up for the loss of trade with the EU.

If the UK economy goes into recession as a result of leaving the EU this will reduce the tax base to pay for public services and social security benefits. None of the parties detail how they would deliver on their spending commitments if the economy goes into recession and the tax base shrinks.

Paying for Plan F by: cancelling any replacement for Trident and increasing taxation by making the tax system more progressive. In doing so consider reversing all tax reductions introduced since 2010 including: reductions in duties on fuel and alcohol; rises in the Personal Income Tax threshold and the introduction of transferable tax allowances, corporation tax cuts and taking effective action on tax debt, avoidance and evasion.

Trident

Labour, Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and UKIP will continue spending on Trident. Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are committed to spending 2% of GDP on defence. The Conservatives will increase this by at least 0.5% above inflation every year and invest £178bn on new military equipment over the next decade.

The SNP and Green Party would scrap Trident.

Tax

The Conservative Manifesto states that it is the party's 'firm intention to reduce taxes on Britain's businesses and working families'. The party will continue with plans to reduce Corporation tax to 17% by 2020, and to raise the personal allowance to £12,500 and the higher rate to £50,000 by the same date. The level of VAT will remain unchanged. The higher threshold for inheritance tax will be maintained. Unlike the 2015 manifesto there is no commitment to maintaining current income tax rates or levels of National Insurance contributions, opening the possibility that these may be increased.

The Labour manifesto argues that 'taxation is what underpins our shared prosperity' but also states that 'we will not ask ordinary households to pay more'. So, there will be no change in the basic and higher income tax rates, but a 45% rate for income over £80,000 a year and a 50% rate for income over £123,000, making the income tax system more progressive. The Transferable Tax Allowance for married couples or couples in a civil partnership will be scrapped. There will be no change to National Insurance Contributions or VAT rates. The increase in the inheritance threshold will be reversed - another progressive move. The bulk of the increased revenue Labour will raise will come from raising Corporation tax rates in stages to 26% by 2020/21, with a small profits rate for companies with profits of below £300,000 of 20% in 2018/19 and 21% in 2020/21. This would leave Corporation Tax at a lower rate than it was in 2010, and [still the lowest in the G7](#). Labour is proposing to 'clamp down hard' on tax avoidance and has published a series of proposals which they say would raise £6.5bn by 2022. In total, Labour estimates that their tax changes will raise an additional £48.6bn a year.

The Liberal Democrats are proposing an increase of 1% on income tax at standard and higher rates, to be spent on increasing funding for health and social care. They would reverse the plans of the

previous Conservative Government to reduce Corporation Tax to 17%, maintaining corporation tax at 20% and tacking 'tough action' on tax evasion and avoidance. They would also reverse the increase in the inheritance tax threshold and remove the transferable tax allowance for married couples and couples in civil partnerships. All of these would raise additional much needed funds for public services. However, their manifesto says nothing about the rise in income tax thresholds (introduced by the Coalition Government and heavily promoted by the Liberal Democrats) and they propose to increase the threshold for National Insurance Contributions, until it is in line with the income tax threshold. This will not benefit the very lowest earners (the majority of whom are women) who earn less than the existing NIC threshold, who gain nothing from this sort of tax giveaway.

UKIP plan to increase the income tax threshold to at least £15,500 by the end of the next parliament and restore personal tax allowance for those with incomes of over £100k. They would raise the inheritance tax threshold to £500,000 with the long term aim of abolishing inheritance tax altogether.

The Green party would reinstate the higher level of corporation tax for large businesses. It is the only party that proposes a Financial Transactions Tax.

The SNP's tax policies apply to Scotland only. They have not cut tax for higher rate tax payers but frozen the basic level of income tax. They support increasing the higher rate of income tax from 45% to 50% across the UK as a whole, and are opposed to further cuts to corporation tax.

The Women's Equality Party would 'discuss proposals' to raise National Insurance Contributions by 1p to pay for social care and health spending. They would also 'consider the option' of reversing the income tax reductions that have been introduced since June 2010 and the cuts in corporation tax.

Conclusion

Labour, the SNP, Green Party and Women's Equality Party all want to end austerity but differ in what they would do first. All propose to reverse some of the cuts to social security and recognise that cuts since 2010 have hit the poorest and most vulnerable hardest. It is notable that social security cuts that have been the subject of high profile public campaigns, such as the two child cap and the bedroom tax receive more attention in the manifestos than other issues such as the overall benefit freeze or the design of Universal Credit. All of the parties make commitments to investment in infrastructure, although only the Women's Equality Party explicitly includes social infrastructure as well as physical infrastructure in their investment proposals. However, the other parties do make specific commitments to additional spending in areas such as health, social care, childcare, and education, without recognising this as social infrastructure investment. Both the Conservatives and UKIP remain committed to low levels of personal and corporate taxation, while the other parties all include proposals for increases in tax to pay for public services.

The significant challenge on which all manifestos are silent is whether and how these spending commitments can be met if the UK economy shrinks once we leave the European Union. This is a worrying silence; most economists expect the UK economy to shrink post Brexit, with the reduction in GDP varying depending on what trading arrangements are agreed with the EU and the rest of the world. If this happens it will reduce the tax base to fund public services; however, none of the parties set out what their priorities would be in this situation.