

Welsh elections 2016 – Response from the Welsh Liberal Democrats

Ahead of the 2016 Welsh elections, the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) wrote to the leaders of all political parties with at least one AM, inviting them to set out their party's policies on science and engineering.

Below is the response from the Welsh Liberal Democrats.

Investment

Innovation and education are key to creating high-value, sustainable jobs in Wales. We recognise that our universities are a key contributor to Wales' economy. We must create an environment that allows entrepreneurship and innovation to flourish, making sure those with the ideas to build a successful business receive the support they need.

Our economic strategy will nurture a business environment that is internationalist in its outlook, eagerly looking for opportunities beyond our borders and confident enough to take advantage of them. We must improve Wales' skills and innovation, access to finance and capital, and access to markets, in order to increase productivity and deliver long-term growth. We want to develop a 25 year Sustainable Growth Strategy, setting out our vision for creating a rebalanced and resilient economy, supported by a Growth Strategy Panel, ensuring all aspects of government are focused on growing our economy.

We will develop an innovation strategy to maximise the opportunities for our universities and private sector to create wealth together, including:

- Creating a database of Research & Development at Welsh universities to encourage collaboration between Higher Education and the private sector.
- Expanding investment in Knowledge-Transfer Partnerships to transfer academic knowledge smoothly to real-life businesses' projects.
- Providing additional finance for universities to support more expensive subjects such as engineering and computer science and tackle gender imbalances in student recruitment.
- Establishing a Wales-wide alumni network for European and international students who have studied in Wales, and Welsh students who have studied abroad, as part of a broader Diaspora Strategy to develop international business links.

Education & Skills

Welsh universities play a vital role in upskilling the Welsh population, and we are proud that they undertake world-leading research. We were glad to be able to negotiate with the Welsh Labour

Government to mitigate the cuts to HEFCW and secure more funding for research and part-time courses.

Welsh Labour's policy of paying towards tuition fees has been an expensive gimmick designed to score political points, but hasn't addressed the issues that really matter to students – their costs of living while at university. To fund the policy, Welsh Labour slashed the teaching block grant paid to universities, leading to damaging cuts to research, part time study & high cost subjects.

Under our plans, we would protect higher education funding. We would introduce a Student Living Support Grant for Welsh domiciled students, helping them meet the cost of living while at university. This would replace the Tuition Fee Grant, shifting government support from deferring future debt to helping answer the very real difficulties students face in paying their rent and bills while at university. 30% of students surveyed by the NUS disagreed that they “feel able to concentrate on my studies without worrying about finances” and over half regularly worry about not having enough money to meet basic living expenses such as rent and bills. This would free up £81.8 million to increase HEFCW's funding, including for Quality Related research, widening access and enhancing employability, and providing more funding for PhDs.

We would direct finance for universities to support more expensive subjects such as sciences, engineering, and computer science and tackle gender imbalances in student recruitment.

Science, Engineering & Policy-Making

Policy making in Wales needs to be based on sound data and scientific evidence. We need to ensure that improved data is gathered on a range of metrics in Wales, to help inform future policy development.

Economic data on Wales is often not sufficient to meet the needs of policy makers. Additionally, Wales is now seeing the devolution of our first powers over taxation. Our task is to manage these new taxes in a prudent and responsible way that is based on evidence, whilst making the case for further powers which will give us an economic advantage as a country. We will:

- Establish an independent Welsh “Office of Budget Responsibility” to provide a rolling independent and authoritative analysis of Wales's public finances.
- Publish a Government Expenditure and Revenue document on a regular basis.
- Commission quarterly GVA/GDP data from the Office of National Statistics, giving us the tools to better influence and manage Welsh economic activity.

To help ensure that we understand the impacts of all Welsh Government policies, we need to improve impact assessments. We will:

- Establish a Regulatory Policy Committee to monitor the impact of Welsh Government policies on business, in particular small and medium sized businesses.
- Require health impact assessments on policy decisions taken at all levels.

- Add carbon impact assessments to all new Welsh legislation, so we can assess its environmental impact and ensure we remain on track to meet emission reduction targets.

We will also update the Wales Housing Survey so as to better inform government policy. We will seek to embed an assets-based approach in all policy and service delivery aimed at helping people break out of poverty. We will retain the Chief Scientific Advisor as an important asset to Welsh Government decision making – it is important that politicians who do not have a thorough understanding of science know who to call on when further information is needed. We will seek to ensure data is presented in a transparent and easy to understand format, so that everyone, especially service users, can understand the information and work to ensure data is collected that is comparable with data collected elsewhere in the UK.