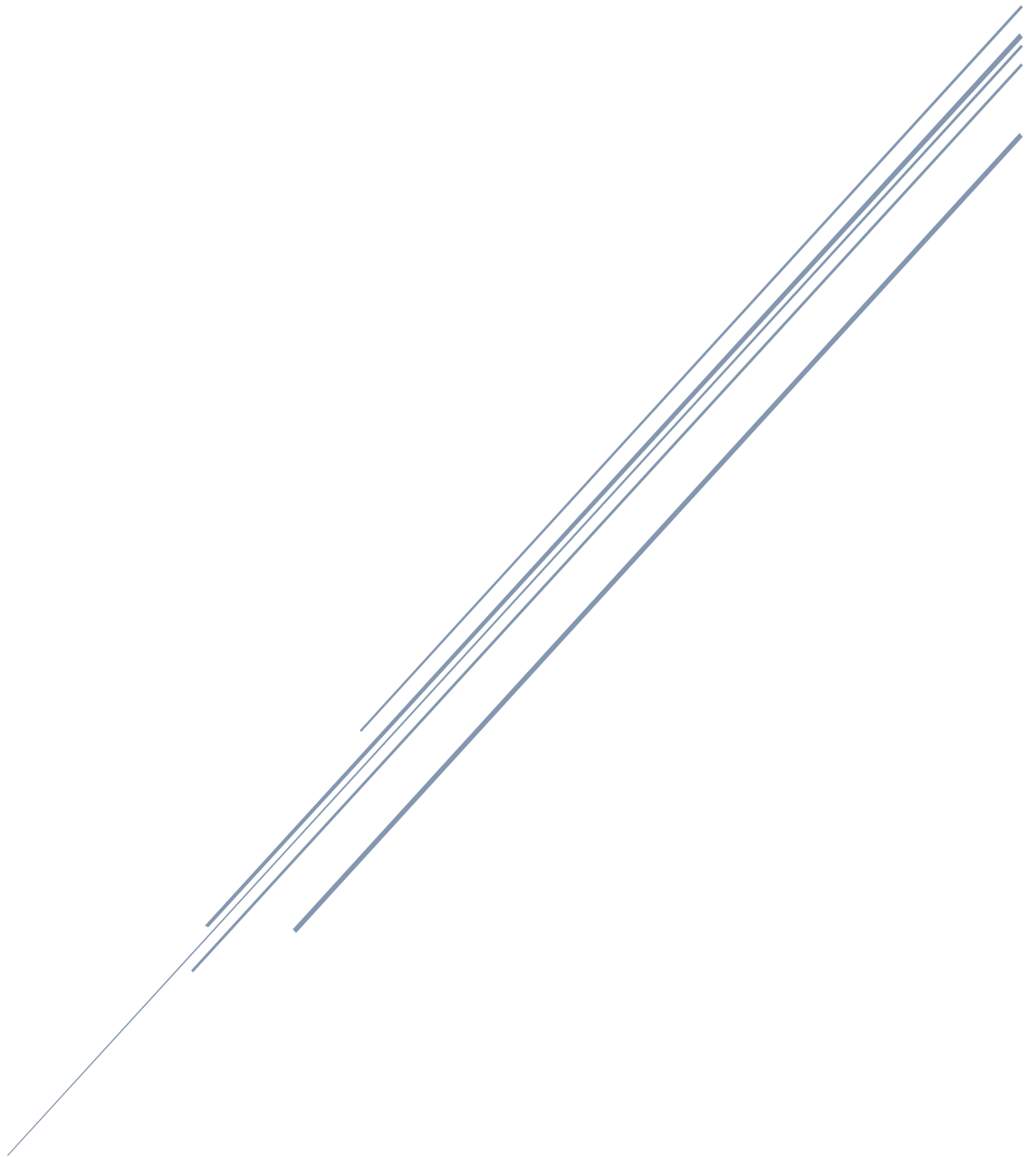


TOWARDS A WELSH PARTY

VISION: OPTIONS AND PROCESS

Discussion Paper for Welsh Liberal Democrat Autumn
Conference 2022



Vision Project Steering Group

Executive Summary

This 'Vision Project' was established by the Welsh Liberal Democrat Board, following the recommendation of the 2020 'O'Carroll Review' into the weaknesses of the 2019 General Election campaign.

A 'Vision Project Steering Group' appointed by the Board has led a process of member workshops and stakeholder interviews as part of a vision development process. The guiding principle is that the vision must be member-led if it is to succeed in becoming embedded at all levels of the party.

Vision is viewed as a link between the party's philosophy and its everyday political messaging and slogans. Three important features of vision (which were highlighted in the stakeholder interviews) are that it should be positive, distinctive, and long-term.

On the basis of the member workshops and stakeholder interviews, this paper sets out three options for a Welsh Liberal Democrat vision. The three options and their key advantages are laid out briefly below, with more details in the full report.

(Option 1) Sustainable communities led

- Uses 'community politics' to put a distinctively liberal twist on an environmental focus
- Recognises the priority/primacy of tackling environmental crises and climate change
- Focus on community allows applicability for all levels of election – local, Welsh, and federal

(Option 2) Education led

- Puts education at the centre of the Welsh Lib Dem offer
- Builds on existing 'brand' and aims at an open/available political space
- Is simple to communicate and practically impacts large parts of the population

(Option 3) Economy led

- Focuses on the economy as the 'key' to progress and to supporting other areas of Welsh society
- Seeks to take-over political space recently vacated by the Conservative Party, and in which Labour & Plaid are relatively weak
- Builds on pro-EU branding and puts EU position front and centre

All these options have drawbacks as well as opportunities and these are discussed in the report. Adopting one of these 'visions' does not mean ignoring other policy areas (e.g. health). Each vision contains linkages across many policy areas and

presents a 'vision' of how we would make changes to society to deliver a wide range of benefits.

Towards a Welsh Party Vision: Options and process

This paper sets out the work undertaken so far to reach a “vision” for the Welsh Liberal Democrats. It outlines three possible “visions” that could be developed, and sets out the planned process to complete that development.

Context and Background

The Welsh Liberal Democrats have not enjoyed electoral success in recent years. Much of this electoral decline can be attributed to UK-wide forces, not least the decision of the federal Liberal Democrats to join a coalition with the Conservatives between 2010-2015. However, there is also a specifically Welsh dimension both to our electoral weakness and to the context of politics in Wales.

Following the unexpectedly weak UK-wide results in the General Election of 2019, the federal Liberal Democrats commissioned a review into the causes of this poor performance. This ‘Thornhill Review’ found that the underperformance was “many years in the making” and among a wide range of criticisms, noted that “the Liberal Democrats had not translated their beliefs into a clear and relevant vision”. The Welsh Party Board recognised that the applicability of the lessons from this review might be different in Wales, and commissioned their own review into its implementation here. The ‘O’Carroll Review’ called for “long-term solutions to long-term problems” and called upon the party to “put in place a project to develop a distinctive, long-term vision for the Welsh Liberal Democrats”.

The Welsh Party Board, adopting this recommendation, put in place a project to develop such a vision, led by a Vision Project Steering Group which reports to the Board. This discussion paper is an outcome of that project.

Project Stages



What is meant by 'Vision'?

The Liberal Democrats have a clear and distinct set of principles, set out in the preamble to our constitution. The language used there is inspirational and accessible, but it does not give a clear idea of what, *in practice*, the Liberal Democrats would do to change our country. Similarly, the Welsh Lib Dems agreed a high-level/philosophical vision paper in 2018 entitled 'A Liberal Wales' which committed us to tackling the 'evils' of want, disease, squalor, ignorance, idleness and loneliness.

We also, of course, produce manifestos at both federal and Welsh level, which set out our detailed policy plans. We also publish slogans ("stop Brexit", "put recovery first") or push combinations of messages – for example the Senedd 2021 leaflets carried three key propositions ("24/7 mental health care service"; "save our local high street and small businesses"; "invest £1 billion to fight the climate emergency").

The Vision Project Group see vision as something that links the party's philosophy and values to its political messaging and slogans. There are several features of a vision upon which almost all of our interviewees were agreed:

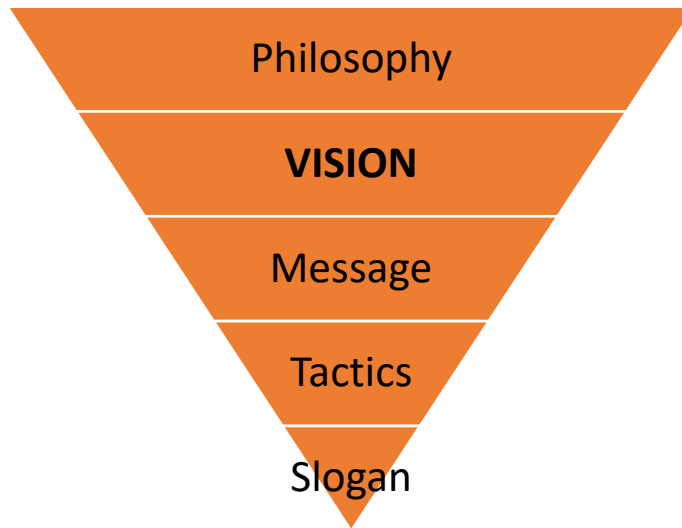
Positive – a vision is an expression of positive action, i.e. "what we would do". It might draw comparisons with our opponents but it needs to be more than an attack on others.

Distinctive – a vision must differentiate us from other political parties. If it merely expresses platitudes or near-universal desires, then it lacks utility.

Long-term – this is what makes a vision different from election messaging. This is the sense in which 'vision' can be conceived as 'brand'. It is not about responding to a particular moment, but is a long-term commitment to priorities or values, that voters can be confident we will not abandon lightly.

One thing all of our interviewees were clear on, is that a vision is not and must not be a detailed list of policies. However, policies have a crucial role in both explaining and delivering on the vision.

Situating 'Vision':



Member Workshops

Four workshops were held online (via Zoom) in the autumn of 2021. They were held at different times and on different days of the week, to facilitate maximum attendance. All members were invited via multiple emails, and posts in WLD Facebook groups. Around 60 people attended in total, out of a total membership of a little over 2,000.

The workshops used interactive software to ensure that all participants' contributions would be captured equally. The first half of each workshop were spent capturing the responses via the software, the second half featured open discussion. At the end of each workshop, participants were asked to rank the various themes, values, or policy priorities that had been identified.

Questions in the Member Workshops

(1) Why did you join (/support) the Welsh Liberal Democrats? What principles, values, messages, or policies inspired you?

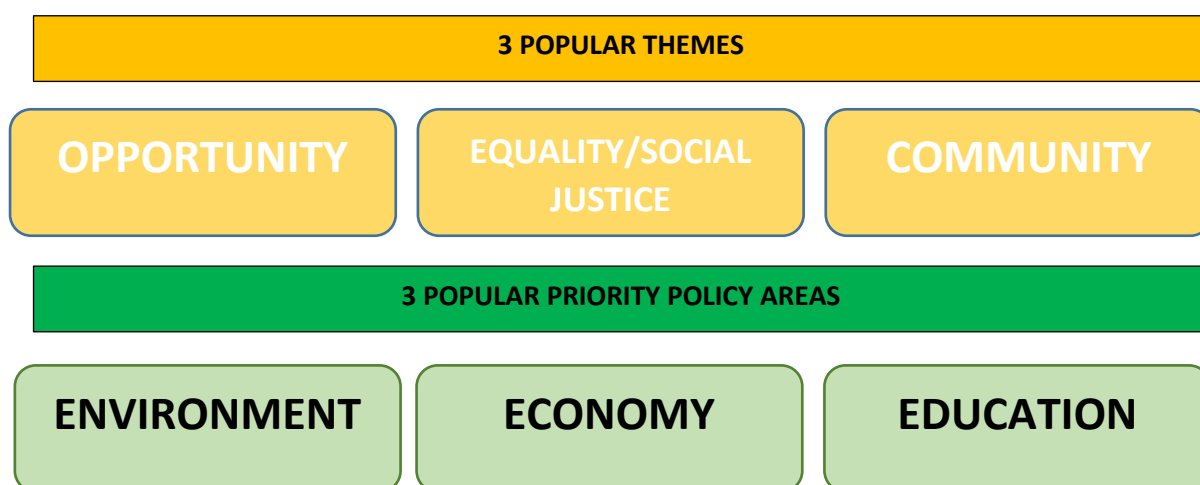
(2) What key values (words/phrases) do you think are important for the Welsh Liberal Democrats over the next 5 years?

(3) What key themes or priorities that you think the Welsh Liberal Democrats should include in their vision?

(4) What would be your "elevator pitch" for the Welsh Liberal Democrats? I.e., if you had 30-40 seconds to persuade someone to support the party (in a positive/permanent way), what would you say?

Workshop Outputs

The combined outputs of the four workshops, in terms of priorities, can be summarised as follows:



These were the themes and policy areas, which, taken across the four workshops as a whole, scored highest in the ranking exercise at the end of each workshop.

Stakeholder interviews

There were a series of stakeholder interviews held over the summer. The purpose was to address key questions, which were:

- Are the outputs broadly acceptable, politically?
- Do they / can they / how can they provide a distinct Welsh Lib Dem position?
- Are there particular policy positions (either existing or to be developed) which can support or illustrate the themes/priority areas?
- Are there any political 'bear traps' that need to be avoided?
- How can the output themes and policy priorities be tied together? How should they be prioritised?
- What format should the final vision take?

Interviews lasted between 30-60mins, and although the above questions were crucial, they did not follow a given script but formed a more free-flowing conversation. We interviewed representatives of the following organisations:

Organisations (representatives) that we interviewed
Welsh Liberal Democrats Party Board Welsh Liberal Democrats staff & Jane Dodds' office staff Welsh Young Liberals Welsh Liberal Democrat Peers ALDC Cymru Green Liberal Democrats Social Liberal Forum Federal Party President

We also held a discussion session at the Membership Development meeting of local party officers.

Developing a coherent vision – three options

These interviews and the discussion session helped us to put “meat on the bones” on the loose priorities emerging from the Member Workshops. Various strengths and weaknesses of the priorities were raised, and various directions of travel relevant to these areas were suggested. These were then stitched together by the Vision Project Steering Group into three options, based around the three policy priority areas that were identified in the member workshops. These are presented below.

Option 1 – Sustainable communities

This takes the environment theme and gives it a distinctively Lib Dem twist.

The importance of the environment to Liberal Democrats

The environment came out as the top concern in the member workshops, and climate change and biodiversity loss present clear and present dangers to our planet. This has always been at the forefront of Lib Dem beliefs, including the line in the preamble to our constitution which states “We believe that each generation is responsible for the fate of our planet and, by safeguarding the balance of nature and the environment, for the long term continuity of life in all its forms”.

The challenge of differentiation in crowded political space

Most of our interviewees were concerned about how to carve out distinctive political space in this area. Not only does the existence of a “Green Party” make it difficult to position ourselves here in a ‘brand’ sense, but the Lib Dems’ concern for thought-through and realistic solutions makes us vulnerable to being gazumped by unachievable headline grabbing – as was the case in the 2019 General Election when Labour committed to the unachievable “net zero by 2025”.

A possible solution – community politics

The theme of ‘community’ was prominent in the member workshops, and “community politics” has often been a guiding principle of the Lib Dems, even if sometimes more as a slogan than as a practice.

There is a potentially distinctive political space for the Lib Dems on the environment issue, which involves linking up with ‘community politics’ and championing a vision for “sustainable communities”. This would bring together longstanding commitment to local communities with the “think global, act local” ideas prominent in the environmental movement.

It is not the aim of this vision process to develop policies, but for illustrative purposes, the type of policies which might play a role in this strand include:

- Radical change to planning laws, to encourage integrated “fifteen minute” communities
- Support for sustainable transport methods
- Devolution of power to town halls and local community councils
- Direct involvement of citizens through participatory methods such as citizens’ assemblies
- Support for community anchors such as local schools, youth clubs, community centres, parks, day care centres, sports clubs, voluntary groups
- Support for smallholdings, allotments, home-growing, and micro-level biodiversity initiatives

Links to other key policy areas / themes

Economy – this vision could include a shift towards a more sustainable economy, utilising the ideas of ‘doughnut economics’

Education – this vision could support a greater focus on citizenship education and volunteering, with children encouraged to be contributing members of a sustainable local community

Health – this vision might focus on community-led health initiatives, such as social care in the community

Social justice – this vision would prioritise intergenerational justice

Opportunity – this vision would prioritise opportunities for individuals within their local community, and for communities to decide local priorities/policies

How does it fit a specifically Welsh political environment

The general thrust of devolutionary and community-based politics stresses local action and is not reliant on UK-wide policy or funding. By putting local communities at the centre of the vision, it deprioritises debates about Welsh independence vs unionism. It cuts across a mix of devolved and federal policy areas, and thus could be useful for all levels of election.

Potential drawbacks

- A lot of the components to this vision are “process”-led. They do not necessarily provide a clear answer to how people’s everyday lives would be improved.
- The environmental element might get lost or squeezed out in the messaging.
- A focus on sustainability and community politics might reinforce stereotypes of Lib Dems as ‘wishy-washy’, or ‘sandal-wearing hippies’.
- Devolution to local councils or local communities might lead some of them to take stances that we disagree with – such as opposing cycle lanes, or opposing new housing developments.

Option 2 – Education

In contrast to the environment or the economy, education is only rarely put front and centre by the other parties, and offers an opportunity for us to build a distinctive political brand.

The importance of education to Liberal Democrats

This speaks directly to the preamble of our constitution, which states that we aim to provide “freedom from ignorance, poverty and conformity”. Education addresses the first of these directly and the others indirectly. It is a policy area that has long been associated with the Lib Dems both federally and within Wales, from Paddy Ashdown’s “penny on income tax to fund education” to Kirsty

Williams' delivery of the education brief and introduction of a new curriculum in Wales.

A simple vision

Of the three vision options presented here, this one is the one that is simplest to communicate and the one in which the 'political space' is most obvious.

It does not rely on a particular liberal means of delivering education – although this certainly exists – so much as prioritising education vis-à-vis other governmental responsibilities. It is something that is easily understood by voters and directly relevant to very many of them. It would be easy for voters to see how this could affect the lives of themselves or their relatives. This simplicity could be politically very powerful.

It is not the aim of this vision process to develop policies, but for illustrative purposes, the type of policies which might play a role in this strand include:

- **Increased funding for education, either as a result of changes to devolved taxation, or through a reprioritisation of government spending**
- **Reduced class sizes – perhaps set at a given “maximum”**
- **Support for small rural schools**
- **Support for all language streams**
- **Support for lifelong / adult education, perhaps building on 'skills wallet' ideas**
- **Support for pupil-centric education, standing up to vested interests and bureaucracies (e.g. as delivered in new curriculum)**

Links to other key policy areas / themes

Economy – education and skills are a (perhaps *the*) crucial component of a modern economy, and investment in education can be expected to lead over time to economic growth

Environment – well-educated citizens are responsible citizens

Social justice – education has long been recognised as a key aspect of social justice, going a long way towards 'levelling the playing field' and breaking down social barriers

Opportunity – education gives people opportunities as individuals, whether for career progression, income security, or simply for personal edification

Community – schools can be keystones of local communities and used for much more than just formal education

How does it fit a specifically Welsh political environment

The option builds upon prior associations between the Welsh Lib Dems and education, not least the role of Kirsty Williams as Education Minister in the fifth Assembly/Senedd. Education is a fully devolved issue which avoids the constitutional complexities of some other areas. Education also has an important

role in the social reproduction of Welsh society (or the Welsh nation), ensuring the continuity of the features or values of Welshness that we see as important.

Potential drawbacks

- Focus on education in this way inevitably leads to less funding for other important areas of social policy, such as the NHS or social care
- Opponents may question our ability to achieve significant improvements in education, or question our record of delivery (either in the 5th Senedd, or in local government) – i.e. Lib Dems may be ‘blamed’ for existing failures in education.
- Debates about cultural issues (language policy, criticism of ‘woke’ issues) could derail our focus or undermine our claims to competence in the eyes of voters

Option 3 – Economy

This builds on previous “put recovery first” branding and moves us into a political space that has been partially vacated by the Conservatives.

The importance of the economy to Liberal Democrats

Economic success is one the ways in which we protect the freedoms outlined in the preamble to our constitution. Classical liberalism championed the idea of laissez-faire economics (Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’), but since the late nineteenth century this has been modified by ideas of ‘positive freedom’, which highlight the need for state intervention (e.g. to support healthcare, education, pensions and other benefits) to ensure that people are not ‘enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity’. Such interventions are easier to finance and improve upon in the context of economic growth. In recent years, the Liberal Democrats have highlighted the economic harm caused by Brexit and the economic benefits that would accrue from rejoining the European single market.

An emerging political space

For much of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the Conservatives dominated this political space, with big leads on “economic competence” in surveys of voter perceptions. However, in the course of the Brexit debate, prominent Conservatives appeared to ignore the concerns of business leaders and economists. Low productivity and weak economic growth have been problems since the 2008 financial crash, and recently soaring inflation, rising interest rates and an impending recession have created a sense of economic crisis. The economy is at the top of voters’ concerns, but they don’t trust either the Conservatives or the Labour Party on this issue, which creates a potential opportunity for the Liberal Democrats.

It is not the aim of this vision process to develop policies, but for illustrative purposes, the type of policies which might play a role in this strand include:

- Stressing our pro-European policies and support for re-joining the single market
- Restatement of longstanding support for reducing VAT in hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors, investigate other fiscal incentives (e.g. cutting income tax)
- Support for rural and agricultural sectors – ensuring that the new ELMS subsidies are at least as generous as under the European CAP, and ensuring that free trade is fair trade by restricting imports of meat where lower animal welfare standards apply
- Working with business to develop improved qualifications and skills training programmes
- Direct support for start-ups and entrepreneurs, seeking to develop a 'Silicon Valley' type environment
- Reducing red-tape and 'nanny state' type measures

Links to other key policy areas / themes

Education – education and skills are essential to achieving economic growth and so in a sense education and the economy are inextricably linked

Opportunity – a healthy economy creates jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities, helps to free people from poverty, and provides opportunities for people to materially improve their lives

Social justice – economic growth helps to fund public services such as the NHS, social care, and benefits programmes

Community – healthy high streets and good local employers can be the bedrock of healthy and vibrant communities

How does it fit a specifically Welsh political environment

The Welsh economy is closely linked with but distinct from the wider UK economy. Wales has a greater reliance on small and medium sized businesses, and on certain sectors (e.g. tourism and hospitality), whereas some other sectors (e.g. finance) are of limited importance in Wales. The ability to pursue pro-growth policies while remaining part of a UK single market provides Wales with the opportunity to be an economic success story, in contrast to much of its recent history.

Potential drawbacks

- Voters want economic competence but they do not expect the Welsh Lib Dems to be in a position to deliver
- Relatively nuanced Lib Dem positions on big economic debates (e.g. positioned between Labour and Conservatives on 'tax and spend') may be difficult to communicate effectively to voters
- The search for constant economic growth may conflict with other liberal principles, such as sustainability or promotion of wellbeing

What next – choosing a vision

The session at conference has the following aims:

- To discuss the merits and drawbacks of the alternative visions presented above
- To suggest how each of the 3 vision options might be amended or improved
- To indicate (via an indicative vote) which of the 3 visions is most important to Welsh Lib Dem members

After this conference the Vision Project Steering Group and WLD Board will:

- refine the options in view of debate/feedback
- work with party staff and committees to ‘flesh out’ the options, both in terms of policy and messaging
- test the vision / messaging with voters and other external stakeholders
- decide to bring one or more vision options as a motion to autumn conference 2023

Frequently asked questions

Do we have to choose? Could we not combine all of these into one overarching vision?

It is important to communicate a single, consistent vision. If we try to be “all things to all people” then voters will be confused about what we stand for.

While each of these vision options is about leading with a certain theme/narrative, they all incorporate some elements of the others. Different elements can be stressed or accentuated. Choosing one does not involve abandoning all elements of the others.

The policy/theme that I care most about isn't on there, could we have a totally different vision that is not one of these three options?

The three options presented here are derived from the member workshops and stakeholder interviews. They are our best effort to represent the wishes of the party. Other important policy areas (e.g. NHS, Europe) can be addressed within the context of each of these visions – it does not mean that they will be forgotten about.

If you feel strongly that an alternative vision should be adopted that is not one of these three, then you will be able to submit an amendment (following the usual submission rules) to the motion that comes to autumn conference 2023.

What practical difference will agreeing a vision make?

Having a consistent, coherent vision will help us to “sell” ourselves to voters, and ultimately to win elections.

Passing a Vision motion at conference will not in itself achieve this – Party Officers, the Board, staff, and volunteers at all levels will need to translate the

vision into action, whether as election messaging, media narratives, policies, or political action.