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Voters' Verdict on Health: What do Liberal Democrat voters think about the role of government and businesses in shaping the nation's health?

This briefing looks at the views of the Liberal Democrat voter coalition on the role of government and businesses in shaping and improving the nation's health, particularly focussing on preventing poor health caused by tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy diets. This includes the voters the Liberal Democrats have gained since the 2024 general election.

Ten 75-minute online focus groups were held between 1 and 10 June 2026 with different voter groups. Groups were defined by current voting intention and voting history. This briefing draws on the groups held with the Liberal Democrats' key target voters: people who intend to vote Liberal Democrat and voted Conservative in 2024 (Conservative switchers), and people who intend to vote Liberal Democrat and voted Labour in 2024 (Labour switchers). The focus groups were supplemented with a short online survey on key issues discussed by the groups.

Summary

Liberal Democrat voters, whether they have come to the party from Labour or from the Conservatives, want the government to do more to prevent ill health and to help people live healthier lives. They see health as shaped by a combination of individual choices, social circumstances, commercial pressures and public policy, and rarely suggested that poor health simply reflects poor choices. Labour switchers emphasise social influences and collective responsibility, while Conservative switchers place more weight on autonomy and personal choice, but both groups want a stronger focus on prevention and on making healthier choices easier.

Liberal Democrat voters see food as the defining health challenge of everyday life. Processed food, takeaways, supermarket promotions and marketing are seen as harder to avoid and more embedded in family life than smoking. Both groups think large food, alcohol and tobacco companies put profit before people's health and cannot be relied on to act voluntarily. They do not want companies with a financial interest in unhealthy products shaping health policy, and place their trust instead in independent expertise, scientific evidence and frontline professionals.

Support for specific interventions rests on evidence and pragmatism. Liberal Democrat voters back measures that protect children, are proportionate and can be shown to work, and their support grew once the detail of a policy was explained. Concern about a 'nanny state' exists in the abstract, particularly among Conservative switchers, but proved a much smaller factor in support for policies than confidence in their effectiveness and fairness. The most persuasive arguments combine prevention, evidence and personal freedom rather than presenting them as competing priorities.

When asked if they are concerned about the impact of industries on children's health, 72% are concerned about the tobacco industry (national average of 63%), 62% the alcohol industry (national average of 58%) and 68% the food industry (national average 65%).

65% of Liberal Democrat voters want to see similar rules that limit the tobacco industry's contact with government, applied to alcohol and unhealthy food and drink companies (national average of 57%).

Views of Liberal Democrat voters

1. **Liberal Democrat voters see preventing ill health as the way to protect the NHS, and want a much stronger focus on prevention**

Liberal Democrat voters believe prevention is key to improving the nation's health. They told us public debate focuses too heavily on treating illness and not enough on preventing it. Conservative switchers explicitly described prevention as the "missing middle" between everyday life and acute healthcare services. Across both groups, prevention was seen as important because it reduces pressure on the NHS, prevents future illness, helps children develop healthy habits and reduces long-term public spending.

> ***"If they were supported better, there wouldn't be so much strain on the NHS. So if you had the steps in to begin with, they wouldn't be going to hospitals."*** **– Female, 30s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"I think the government could help more potentially, because obviously things like drink, smoking leads to addiction, which then obviously people then need help with that with public health and the NHS."*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

2. **Liberal Democrat voters think people's health is shaped by their circumstances and environment, not just their choices**

Liberal Democrat voters see health through a broad social lens, reflecting on how poor health is shaped by poverty, cultural norms, convenience, affordability, loneliness and family environments. Participants rarely suggested that poor health simply reflects poor choices. Labour switchers in particular thought emotional, psychological and social circumstances drive unhealthy behaviour, while Conservative switchers focused more on cost, convenience and modern lifestyles. Across the coalition, voters recognise that health outcomes are strongly shaped by circumstances beyond individual control, and that the cost of living is making healthy choices harder.

> ***"I think it's environmental and culture… My perception is that a child with parents who smoke will smoke. A child in a community where there's a higher prevalence of smoking and drinking will do the same. So it feels like it's certain, not exclusively, but more prevalent in certain subsets of society or class or culture."*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

> ***"The poorer you are, the less access you have to healthy food...when you are worried about feeding your children, the last thing or you're worried about is what you're feeding them, you just don't want hungry children."*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

> ***"Obviously there's an issue with cost of living. So obviously a lot of people will go towards cheaper food stuff, which tend to be less healthy."*** **– Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

3. **Food is seen as the defining health challenge of everyday life**

Liberal Democrat voters think food is the health challenge people encounter most in day-to-day life. They are concerned about processed food, sugar, takeaways, supermarket promotions, unhealthy food environments and declining cooking skills. Food was seen as a bigger challenge than smoking because it is deeply embedded in family life, more common, socially normalised and harder to avoid. Voters connected this directly to the commercial environment. For example, fast food that is cheap, heavily marketed and available at the tap of a phone, big brands dominating supermarket promotions and shelf space, and products designed to be eaten in quantity.

> ***"There's so many more fast food restaurants that you can go to… [when I was younger] a takeaway was a real, real treat. Whereas now kids get takeaways two, three times a week."*** **– Female, 30s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"You go to supermarkets and it's always big brands that are on offer or advertise more and the little ones have a little space on the bottom of the shelf."*** **– Female, 30s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"You can get anything delivered to your house. You can get a bottle of vodka delivered to your house by delivery, whatever. So there's a whole new raft of companies that further facilitate that and that lifestyle that everything's just very easy."*** **– Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"Kids are better educated now as to what a healthy diet and lifestyle looks like. But the issue is that what's accessible to them is the opposite basically...stuff that tastes better because it's designed to taste better and it's designed to metabolise in a way that they want more of it"*** **– Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

4. Liberal Democrat voters think large companies put profit before people's health

Labour and Conservative switchers are in strong agreement that large companies have a major and largely negative influence on the nation's health. Voters think businesses prioritise profit over health, shape consumer behaviour through marketing, dominate advertising and retail environments, and have little incentive to act voluntarily to improve health. Companies comply with regulations because they have to, not because health is a priority, and voters expected them to lobby against measures that would cost them money. Big companies were seen as different from small ones because their marketing budgets crowd out everything else, through sponsorship of sport and targeted advertising on social media as well as television.

> ***"They will fulfil the guidelines that they're set out to do. It doesn't feel like it's one of their priorities. They're there to make money."*** **– Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"In an ideal scenario, cigarette companies wouldn't sell cigarettes that cause cancer and vodka companies wouldn't sell strong vodka that kills people, but they're private companies and they want to make money...As long as there's money to be made, it's going to be made and they'll lobby government to keep it that way"*** **– Male, 20s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

> ***"The small companies, their advertising doesn't really reach the surface because it's covered by all the big companies...the big companies will just swallow up all the ad space and probably reach all of our social media algorithms"*** **– Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"It's like adverts on social media. And you know what it's like when you are looking at your phone and you've talked about going camping, then that appears on your phone as well. I think that there's lots of subliminal stuff going on in social media where we could use all of that for good and I don't know that we always do. We use it for profit."*** **– Female, 50s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"The last people you should be consulting on a policy that's going to make them less money is those people that it's going to make less money for."*** **– Male, 20s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

Liberal Democrat voters do not want companies with a financial interest in unhealthy products shaping health policy. They think policy should be shaped by scientific evidence, healthcare professionals, health charities and public health organisations, and by the frontline staff who see the consequences of poor health every day.

***"The government should do more, but the private companies, I mean, their existence is at complete odds with public health, in my opinion. These companies know what they're doing to people. They pay millions in research to know what a cigarette or a bottle of vodka does to someone."* – Male, 20s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

***"I think they should canvas the grassroots really. I think they should talk to nurses who are in the wards. They should talk to carers who are looking after elderly patients that have smoked all their lives. They should talk to people on the ground floor on that grassroot level that have no agenda, that have no reason to give false information or just give them truthful, honest information that they see every day."* – Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

5. Liberal Democrat voters see health as a shared responsibility between individuals, government and business

Liberal Democrat voters take a nuanced view of where responsibility for health lies. Personal responsibility matters, but participants said responsibility is shared between individuals, government, businesses, families, schools and communities. Labour switchers tend to describe health as a collective challenge, while Conservative switchers place more emphasis on individual choice and personal agency within that wider picture. Across both groups there is little support for placing responsibility entirely on any single group or organisation.

***"They should support people, but it's different things…It's prevention, it's regulation and its education, probably an equal measure"* – Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

6. Liberal Democrat voters support government action to help people live healthier lives, and judge specific measures on evidence and effectiveness

Liberal Democrat voters support government action to improve people's health, and their support grows when they are confronted with the specifics of a policy rather than the idea of intervention in the abstract. Both groups pointed to action on smoking as proof that government intervention can work. Concern about a 'nanny state' exists in the abstract, and Conservative switchers in particular do not like being told what to do, but it proved a much smaller factor in support for specific policies than confidence in their effectiveness and fairness. Key to support is evidence that a measure will work, and messaging around enabling healthier choices rather than restricting freedom.

***"The idea of a nanny state is unattractive, although I think perhaps there are some things like the vape point that the government could do."* – Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

***"Less people smoke than ever have now...I feel like the measures the government have put in place to discourage people to smoke tobacco have worked."* – Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

***"Smoking is a good example, I think, because everybody who either smokes or doesn't smoke knows that it basically causes cancer. But actually the laws have been in place. Smoking is, they've probably been successful in stopping people from smoking, young people smoking."* – Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

***"Information needs to be freely available, but you need to treat people like adults."* – Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

7. Children provide the strongest case for government action

Across both groups, protecting children was the most persuasive argument for government action. Liberal Democrat voters supported health and cooking education in schools, more physical education, restrictions on marketing aimed at children and action on youth vaping. Conservative switchers who were wary of intervention aimed at adults were comfortable with government acting to protect children, and Labour switchers described children as too impressionable to be left exposed to brands and advertising.

> ***"I think children, I think it's more important to, like you said, like they were saying around schools, if they're not getting enough physical education, that's something that the government can intervene and assist in."*** **– Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"If you educated even children, like I said, I work in a primary school, so even if you start educating them at a young age, then you're setting them in the right direction"*** **– Female, 30s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"I think children are so impressional that we need to protect them from these brands and this advertising...Anything we can do to stop children from making those bad choices with food or pestering their parents to make the bad choices is a good thing."*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

How Liberal Democrat voters responded to public health policy ideas

We showed participants three public health policies to understand the considerations that shape their views. Liberal Democrat voters judged them on fairness, effectiveness and proportionality.

Smokefree Generation

The Smokefree Generation policy is viewed positively by both groups. Voters liked that it protects future generations, is gradual rather than abrupt and does not directly affect current smokers. Doubts centred on enforcement, with participants expecting some sales to move to corner shops and the black market, and on whether vaping is now the bigger problem. Framing that stresses the gradual nature of the policy and the protection of future generations, alongside strong messaging on enforcement, will be persuasive for Liberal Democrat voters.

> ***"I think it is the right sort of approach… smoking won't completely go away, but it is the right sort of approach."*** **– Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"I've got teenage kids. So under this, one of my children will be allowed to buy tobacco in one way. As a parent, it's a great feeling to know that that is just never going to be an issue for them."*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

> ***"I think it's a good start, to be honest. I think if there wasn't things like this happening, then we'd be complaining that nothing's being done. So we have to have some sort of positive attitude that this potentially can help"*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

> ***"I've got teenage children and I've just lost one parent...to COPD...smoking all her life and I'm just about to lose another one for the same reason because they all smoked...I think this is brilliant. I think this is absolutely brilliant and I work with children and I can see that less children smoke and I think this is brilliant."*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

Minimum unit pricing for alcohol

Liberal Democrat voters are divided on minimum unit pricing. Many liked the principle of targeting cheap, strong alcohol and thought the policy had merit given the harm alcohol causes, but doubted it would change the behaviour of dependent drinkers and worried it could leave people in poverty worse off. Conservative switchers were the most sceptical, feeling the policy isn't nuanced enough, while several voters in both groups thought the proposed minimum price was too low to change behaviour. Framing that shows the policy targets the cheapest, strongest products and leaves the majority of consumers largely unaffected, backed by evidence from where it has already been introduced, will be important to build support.

> ***"I do think that the percentage based pricing makes sense. If you're after something that's going to be really effective at getting you drunk, you should pay more for that. And I would argue that the brands that sell whiskey for very cheap are targeting a very particular crowd. People in poverty that are trying to use alcohol to be a support network. Now there's the question of if you make that more expensive, are they still going to get it, but that's just going to be even more detrimental to their poverty because they're spending more to get the same potentially."*** **– Male, 20s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

> ***"I think because it targets certain behavioural choices or issues or crutches, I think there's a lot of merit to it…I just don't know in practise if it will really work, but if it's working elsewhere and we've got the data, then great."*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

Restrictions on unhealthy food advertising

Liberal Democrat voters support restrictions on junk food advertising in principle, and Labour switchers in particular saw it as a low-cost, no-regrets measure that protects children. Conservative switchers questioned how much difference it would make when children encounter junk food in so many other places, such as supermarket checkouts, and already know the brands. Support depends on the restrictions being seen as one part of a wider effort rather than a solution in itself.

> ***"What about when you take your kids in the supermarket? The first things you see is rows and rows of chocolates and sweets. And so I don't see what difference that would make."*** **– Female, 60s, South Cambridgeshire, Conservative switcher**

> ***"It's kind of a no regrets one because it's actually very little to minimal in terms of cost to implement. It's not going to have a negative effect on anyone. You're going to take away some of that sort of temptation…so I think this feels like a really easy win."*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

> ***"If you can reduce the amount that children are making decisions about their health like this, bad decisions about their health and the better. And then when they're older, they see these adverts and they want to get involved, they're a bit older and their decision making might be a bit more mature"*** **– Male, 20s, Cheltenham, Labour switcher**

There are clear messaging implications for Liberal Democrat voters

Liberal Democrat voters link prevention with reducing pressure on the NHS. Framing action to improve health around protecting NHS resources and ensuring services are there when people need them is likely to be effective with Liberal Democrat voters.

Liberal Democrat voters care about enabling individuals and communities to make healthier choices. Messaging that emphasises making it easier to live healthier lives is more likely to resonate with Liberal Democrat voters than messaging about restricting people's choices.

Liberal Democrat voters respond to evidence and balance rather than ideological arguments about the size of the state. Messaging that shows a policy is proportionate, backed by evidence and compatible with personal freedom will be more persuasive than arguments about intervention in principle.

Liberal Democrat voters respond well to arguments about protecting children. Protecting children was the most persuasive rationale for action in both groups, and food and advertising aimed at children resonate particularly strongly.

Liberal Democrat voters respond well to arguments about holding powerful companies to account. Both groups think large companies put profit before health and want policy shaped by independent experts and frontline professionals rather than industry.

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