

On Monday at Liberal Democrat conference, party members will have the chance to debate policy motion F31 which endorses a new Liberal Democrat welfare policy paper.

However, as one of the members of the working group which wrote the paper, I strongly urge all members at conference to vote **against** the motion.

My reasons for saying this are simple: although the policy paper is called 'Mending the Safety Net', what it proposes is nothing of the sort. In fact, it actively endorses the current welfare system which is failing so badly that [over a million people](#) in the UK don't just live in poverty but are actively destitute.

This is undoubtedly one of the greatest social challenges facing our country - even if you set aside the human suffering it creates, poverty costs the UK [£78 billion a year](#), blighting our national prosperity.

When set against that backdrop, the welfare policy motion is a failure.

In my opinion it lets down some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in society by failing to offer real solutions to the problems they face, it spectacularly misses the opportunity to define a real and distinctive alternative approach to welfare for the Liberal Democrats, and, crucially, it cannot be made fit for purpose even if all the amendments to it on the agenda are passed.

That's not to say there's nothing good in the paper. There are several changes proposed that are very welcome indeed. But when you look at the paper as a whole, all of these amount to little more than fiddling around the edges instead of tackling the big issues facing the welfare system.

Here are some of the ways in which the paper tinkers round the edges rather than actually fixing our broken safety net:

- It proposes keeping benefit sanctions which can see benefit claimants left destitute and unable to afford to eat for 'crimes' like being 2 minutes late to an appointment – while it proposes new 'safeguards', these are little better than the safeguards which have already failed in the current system
- It perpetuates the notion that claimants should have to "prove" they're looking for work by jumping through bureaucratic hoops if they wish to receive any support from the welfare system - and the best it offers to deal with the fact that many deserving people are unable to jump through these hoops is to promise £10 a week extra to those who do really well at proving they're looking for work
- It proposes keeping unfair disability benefit assessments that have seen many severely disabled people (including paralympians) lose vital support and equipment such as mobility cars and does very little to help carers

- The biggest change it proposes is to introduce opt-out income protection insurance policies for people in work - a helpful addition to the safety net but one which only relatively well-off earners will be able to afford to pay for and benefit from
- It fails to offer more than tokenism in tackling child poverty – giving the poorest families £5 a week extra and telling the second adult in a household to get a job will barely make a dent in the number of children living in poverty

But worst of all, at a fundamental level, the paper fundamentally buys into the shared Labour and Conservative viewpoint that there are “deserving” and “undeserving” poor and that a social safety should only be provided for the former.

For me, and many liberals, the role of the welfare system should be to provide a safety net for everyone. In the same way that we guarantee everyone access to healthcare via the NHS and education via state schools, we should be guaranteeing, at the very least, that no one in one of the wealthiest countries in the world is left homeless or unable to afford to eat.

The challenge of how to provide this is what the paper should have been trying to answer. In the process it could have given us a distinctive and utterly different policy that would have made the Liberal Democrats stand out and given us something to fight for with pride.

With the party on just 8% in the polls we can't afford to have bad or timid policy. We need radical, innovative policies which will grab attention and which offer a compelling vision for a better future for everyone in society.

Unfortunately, while amendments were submitted to the motion which could have made some real changes, the only ones selected for debate by Federal Conference Committee (FCC) simply don't go far enough to be able to fix the problems at the heart of the paper.

To make matters worse, under FCC rules, once a topic has been debated at conference it can't be debated again for at least another two years - meaning we'd have to wait until 2018 to revisit the issue.

So, sadly, voting the motion down is now the only realistic option. No new policy on welfare would be better than conference approving bad policy - especially since our existing policy already commits us to opposing the Tory welfare cuts - and, by voting the motion down, members would create the opportunity for something better to be brought to next conference.