



National Education Service – LGA Labour response

The LGA Labour Group exists to provide a strong voice for Labour in local government, both within the cross-party LGA and within the wider Labour Party. We represent and support Labour councils and opposition Labour Groups in England and Wales, including political support, leadership training, and sector-led improvement. We aim to influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to Labour councils so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems.

Our leadership, officers, and regional representatives are elected by Labour Groups on an annual basis, and our elected leader, Cllr Nick Forbes, is the de facto leader of Labour in local government.

Introduction

We welcome Labour's commitment to ensuring that every citizen has access to good quality education and skills training through the National Education Service, regardless of their age or their background. A good education at school forms the basis for a good job later on in life, and skills training for adults enables those in work or those looking for work, to learn new skills according to their employment needs and the employment demands in local areas.

Over the last eight years, austerity has had a significant impact on the education that is provided. Local authorities have seen their budgets cut by almost 60% since 2010, which has had an impact on services such as Sure Start, early years provision and lifelong learning, as well as schools facing significant pressures on their budgets. A properly funded and locally delivered National Education Service will play an important part in delivering inclusive economic growth, ensuring that everyone is able to maximise their own potential through learning and employment, and that everyone benefits from economic growth.

The concept of a nationally set framework and outcomes is positive, but it is imperative that local authorities are at the centre of delivering the National Education Service. Key priorities of elected national government will still be vitally important, but ministers will need to give freedom to local communities to decide how they are implemented in their areas. For too many people, the circumstances into which they are born are still the determinant of their life chances. But councils, uniquely placed to bring together vital support for children and families and to develop more comprehensive support, have shown that when given the right support, we can tackle inequality in our communities.

Labour local authorities have played a leading role in keeping their family of local schools together, despite not having any formal accountability role. Local authorities have a responsibility for school improvement and planning school places. There is also more and more evidence showing the link between good early years provision, good school education, and good physical and mental health in children. Local authorities are best suited to know the needs of their local areas, and the skills that will be required in an inner city area such as Islington will be different to those required in a rural area such as Herefordshire, or to a town such as Loughborough. Therefore, local authorities must play a key role in shaping their education and skills offer for their local area, from what is offered to the delivery of it.

At all stages of education we envisage local schools, colleges, universities and delivery partners working together to deliver shared education and skills outcomes, pooling the resources and expertise that they have. Stroud Council, a Labour-run authority in Gloucestershire, have encouraged over 1,000 year 19 pupils from the district's secondary and special schools to meet over 65 local employers across all sectors, and 14 further and higher education providers in the area. This is Gloucestershire's most successful education-business event, and it is run in partnership with SGS College and the University of Gloucestershire.

Ofsted's latest Annual Report on education and children's services showed that 91% of maintained schools are now rated as good or outstanding, compared to 85% of academies and 84% of free schools. Government figures show that councils have an excellent track record of fulfilling their statutory duty to ensure that every school child has a place available to them.

We have three key asks around accountability, commissioning, and devolution in relation to the National Education Service and this consultation.

Accountability

It is important that the delivery of local education and skills services, whether that be in schools or in work training, are locally accountable. We know that the public want more accountability over their public services to ensure they are run effectively and with the interests of local people put first. As a first step, a National Education Service should include the principle that every state funded school must be locally accountable.

To enable this, the National Education Service should take advantage of councils' unique position in the community, by giving them a clear and strategic role in school improvement and holding schools to account for education standards. Local government must be recognised as an improvement partner by central government and by schools. This means being empowered to help all schools improve where necessary, including academies and free schools. The LGA has also called for councils to have greater powers over school places and a say on where new schools are built.

Whilst it would be tempting to simply rip-up everything that the Tory government has imposed since 2010, the lengthy legislative, and likely legal, process of doing so would distract from getting our education system back on track. Whilst we clearly want a more cohesive school system with local accountability, our focus must be on standards, rather than the status of schools. A National Education Service should enable a constructive relationship of challenge and support between councils and all types of schools.

There is no obvious reason why councils or maintained schools should not have the power to take over failing academies and free schools if they have an excellent track record in school improvement. Combined with giving councils powers and responsibilities for place planning, school admissions, and protecting vulnerable children that apply equally to all schools, the National Education Service would be enabling local areas to shape education in a sustainable way.

We would also suggest looking at bringing Regional Schools Commissioners (RSC) into the local chain of accountability, either via Mayoral Combined Authorities, Combined Authorities or via groups of councils. At present, this is a role that is unelected with little accountability, but we would propose changing the RSC model to ensure greater accountability. RSCs would be employed regionally – perhaps along the LGA's proposed Work Local lines (please see the section below on commission for an explanation of Work Local), and ministerial power would be devolved to them. This would make

them accountable to both central government and local government, therefore putting local government back into the chain of accountability in education.

Commissioning

There are two aspects of commissioning which the National Education Service should consider improving.

Firstly, in relation to place planning, local councils should be given the freedom to open new schools where they are needed. The Free School programme sunk hundreds of millions of pounds into purchasing expensive and often highly inappropriate premises, and has seen new schools being opened in areas where there are already surplus places. Many of these schools have now failed or closed. The bizarre position where local councils are responsible for providing sufficient school places, whilst having their ability to open new local authority maintained schools constrained, must end. A Labour government needs to allow councils to build new schools, with funding support, and support councils to expand existing well performing schools.

Secondly, one of the LGA's main concerns is that the current system of skills delivery is too fragmented. The LGA has found that in 2016/17, £10.5 billion was spent by 8 government departments or agencies via 20 different national schemes, which results in a confusing picture for learners, and a fragmented and often competing provision on the ground. As a result, this centralised and fragmented system fails to respond to local needs.

To simplify commissioning and make skills delivery more responsive to local needs, the LGA has proposed that local areas should have significant powers over skills commissioning. Our Work Local project specifies proposes that Work Local areas (either Mayoral Combined Authorities, Combined Authorities or groups of councils) will plan, commission and have oversight of a joined-up service bringing together advice and guidance, employment, skills apprenticeships and business support around place for individuals and employers. This would be a more targeted and co-ordinated approach and would better serve young people and adults who are either unemployed, low skilled, or have complex needs, and support local economic growth by bringing training providers and businesses together.

Across a medium sized Combined Authority, the LGA has estimated that this approach could each year result in 8,500 people off out of work benefits, 6,000 people attaining better skills, additional fiscal benefits of £280 million and a benefit to the economy of £420 million.

This Work Local approach is critical as Mayoral Combined Authorities, Combined Authorities, councils and local partners plan how their areas will respond to the challenges and opportunities of Brexit and the Government's Industrial Strategy. The LGA is continuing to call on the Government to embrace this place based approach, as the positive economic impact is clear.

Devolution

Historically, successive governments have sought to devolve parts of skills policy and the budget to fund them. However, with the introduction of devolution deals, Mayoral Combined Authorities and Combined Authorities, coupled with the total devolution of skills to the devolved nations, there is an argument that a future Labour government should be radical and devolve skills (and the corresponding budget) to Mayoral Combined Authorities, Combined Authorities or groups of authorities (along the LGA's Work Local lines) as this will give areas control of ensuring that their area has the skills that it needs, and it puts place at the heart of the education and skills agenda.

This would allow places to provide all levels of skills – from basic English and Maths skills, to ESOL lessons (enabling those who have employable skills but who have recently arrived to learn English and go on to employment) and other basic adult skills as is needed, as opposed to places being told what they can provide by central government agencies.

The devolution of skills and their corresponding budget also allows local areas to deal with their local needs. For example, the proportion of residents with low qualifications ranges from one in three residents in Sandwell to one in seventeen in Richmond Upon Thames; and while more than a quarter of residents of Blackpool have a work limiting disability, just one in ten in Waltham Forest do. These differences matter, with disabled people more than twice as likely to be out of work as those who are not disabled. This is not a difference that can easily be tackled from Whitehall, but one that is best tackled locally.

We envisage that the devolution of funding would be in the form of a block grant to Combined Authorities and groups of councils, or as part of devolution deals with Mayoral Combined Authorities. This would be coupled with continued national grants, progressive devolution of existing funding streams and local revenue-raising – creating a single, seamless system.

Conclusion

A properly funded, locally delivered National Education Service will be an important step in ensuring that everyone is able to access good quality education and lifelong learning regardless of where they live.

Local accountability is vital – we suggest that councils are given a clear and strategic role in school improvement and holding schools to account for education standards. We want to see a more cohesive school system, but with a focus on standards rather than the status of the schools. There is also a role for RSCs, accountable either via Mayoral Combined Authorities, Combined Authorities or groups of councils. With RSCs locally accountable and with ministerial power devolved to them, local government will have a place in the local accountability chain for education.

Local authorities should also play a key role in commissioning under the National Education Service. Local councils should be given the freedom to open new schools where they are needed, as they are best placed to know the local need and demand for school places. Supporting local authorities to build new schools, with funding support, and to expand existing schools that perform well should be a key aim of the National Education Service. In addition to this, local areas should have significant powers to commission skills, replacing the fragmented national system that we currently have. Local areas will plan, commission and have oversight of a joined-up service bringing together all aspects of skills delivery, ensuring a better outcome for local residents.

Lastly, a National Education Service, under a Labour Government, must be bold and devolve skills budgets to Mayoral Combined Authorities, Combined Authorities or groups of authorities as this will give areas control of ensuring that their area has the skills that it needs.

Labour in local government looks forward to working with colleagues nationally to deliver the National Education Service for the benefit of our residents and for more inclusive economic growth.