



NATIONAL  
POLICY  
FORUM  
2021  
Early Years,  
Education  
and Skills

## MEMBERSHIP 2021

### HM Opposition

Kate Green MP\*  
Matt Western MP  
Tulip Siddiq MP  
Wes Streeting MP

### NEC

James Asser\*  
Nick Forbes  
Michael Wheeler

### CLPs and Regions

George Downs – North West Region  
Joy Gough – South East Region  
Owen Hooper – Eastern Region  
Clare Lally – Scottish Policy Forum  
Cameron Matthews – Eastern Region  
George Norman – Yorkshire and Humber Region  
Elly Owen – Welsh Labour Party  
Tom Pearce – South West Region  
Brenda Weston – South West Region  
Adele Williams – East Midlands Region

### Affiliates

Phillipa Marsden – Unite  
David McCrossen – Usdaw  
June Nelson – BAME Labour  
Barbara Plant – GMB  
Maggie Ryan – Unite

### Elected Representatives

Anntoinette Bramble – Local Government Association  
Lord Jim Knight  
Tim Swift – Association of Labour Councillors

\*Co-convenor



# The work of the Early Years, Education and Skills Policy Commission

## Attainment gap

Following Keir Starmer's pledge that the next Labour government would implement a national strategy with clear targets to close the education gap at every stage in a child's development, the Commission held an evidence session on the attainment gap. The Commission heard evidence from the Education Policy Institute, the Sutton Trust and the Education Endowment Foundation. During this session, the Commission heard that there is a stubborn attainment gap, particularly acute for children in persistent poverty, for whom none of the policy interventions in the last decade have had any impact on attainment. The speakers also gave evidence in relation to the estimated level of learning loss due to the pandemic, and the likely impact on the attainment gap.

## Further and adult education

The Commission held a stakeholder roundtable with the further education and skills sector to hear evidence about the impact of the pandemic. Attendees included representatives from the Association of Colleges through to the Learning and Work Institute. The Commission heard the importance of the sector to the nation's recovery, particularly for young people and those at risk of unemployment.

## The education workforce

The Commission held a stakeholder roundtable with education unions, both affiliated and non-affiliated. Attendees included NASUWT, NEU, UCU, Unite, Unison and ASCL. The Commission had a detailed discussion about the challenges facing the education workforce, including pay, workloads and professional development. The Commission also heard evidence from the early years sector that early years practitioners in particular were struggling with chronic low pay and low morale.

## Vulnerable children

As part of Labour's commitment to tackle child poverty, and ensure every child can achieve their potential, the Commission held a roundtable with children's charities to hear about the impact of the pandemic on children, the particular

challenges vulnerable children face and the policy responses required. The charities outlined their concerns for the most vulnerable children in society as well as children's wellbeing across the board as they return to classrooms. Attendees included the Children's Society, NSPCC and Save the Children.

## Higher education

The Commission held a roundtable with the higher education sector, with attendees ranging from the Russell Group through to the Open University. The sector made the Commission aware of the particular challenges students and universities have faced during the pandemic, from online tuition through to student accommodation, and how students and universities need support to recover.

## Early years

As outlined above, the Commission heard evidence of the impact of the last twelve months on the early year's sector, as well as a discussion of underlying challenges facing the sector, such as the chronic underfunding of childcare and workforce morale.



# Principles

In the 2020 interim report the Commission set out 10 principles that would guide Labour's policy development on early years, education and skills. Following consultation on the interim report, these principles have been amended to reflect the feedback received.

1. A transformative education system that is evidence-based, resourced, enriching, and meets the needs of learners, employers and wider society
2. Everyone has the opportunity to make the most of their learning and reach their full potential, regardless of their background or where they live
3. A renewed focus on tackling the attainment gap at every stage of education
4. A commitment to action to drive down child poverty
5. Ensuring lifelong opportunities for education and skills training which are accessible and fair to all
6. All members of the education workforce are supported at every stage – from early years and school to college and university
7. An education system that sits at the heart of and is accountable to local communities
8. The most vulnerable children, are protected and supported, including those in and around the care system and with special educational needs
9. Protecting children's mental health and wellbeing
10. Inclusive education that tackles prejudice and discrimination, and enables everyone to learn

## Making Britain the best place to grow up: how to ensure children are at the heart of our recovery from Covid-19

The submissions, member's roundtables and evidence sessions offered a wealth of policy ideas in answer to the consultation questions. A number of broad policy positions emerged, underpinned by the ten guiding principles.

First, the need for a comprehensive strategy for children's recovery that: prioritises children's wellbeing as well as academic attainment, addresses socioeconomic inequality, and is properly resourced. Labour is committed to a Children's Recovery Plan, which includes a universal entitlement to a free healthy breakfast, and funds schools to provide extracurricular activities, from sports and music through to drama and book clubs, to improve children's wellbeing.

Second, that addressing child poverty and inequality must be a priority for Labour. During the course of the consultation, the commission heard evidence that for children in persistent poverty, the attainment gap has remained unchanged in over a decade, despite a number of policy interventions. Labour is committed to ensuring that a child's background does not dictate their chances to realise their aspirations. As part of that commitment, Labour would extend the limited small-group tutoring currently on offer to all children who need it, to ensure no child falls behind because of pandemic disruption.

Third, increased funding and support to schools and teachers. The Labour Party is committed to investing in our children's futures. Labour is committed to increasing funding to schools, through an Education Recovery Premium, to invest in children



who have faced disruption from early years through to further education. Labour also firmly supports all staff working in the education sector, and believes that teachers should be able to access continued professional development.

Fourth, that children and young people's mental health should be prioritised throughout their education. A common theme amongst the submissions and evidence sessions was that for too long children's mental health has been seen as a priority only when problems arise, rather than nurturing good mental health throughout early life. Labour believes that quality mental health support should be available in every school, and that every child should have access to qualified in-school counselling staff. Labour believes in investing in our children's mental health.

Fifth, that access to further and adult education will be vital as we emerge from the pandemic. The Commission heard that the pandemic risked a 'lost generation' of young people as school leavers and graduates suffered from poor labour market conditions, and that access to continued learning would mitigate that risk. Labour believes that lifelong learning should be accessible to all adults, and that opportunities such as apprenticeships should be encouraged and supported by government.

## Submissions to the consultation

This year's consultation sought views on policies to enable children and the education system to recover from the pandemic, both in the short and long term. The consultation asked what a strategy for children's recovery should look like and what policy changes, in the longer term, could help ensure every child and young person is able to achieve their potential. It also asked for specific policy suggestions in relation children's mental health and wellbeing, what resource the education system needs to support recovery and what support pupils in key transition years in particular might need.

The Commission received many submissions providing examples, insight and policy ideas on all of these areas, with five key themes arising across many of the submissions: socioeconomic inequality, early year's provision, support for teachers and schools, children's wellbeing, and the importance of skills provision.

## Beyond the school gates

A key theme across many submissions was the extent to which factors outside of school affect a child's ability to achieve their potential. It was suggested that while this has been highlighted and exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, socioeconomic circumstances have always been a barrier to academic attainment.

"Poverty at home is the strongest statistical predictor of how well a child will achieve in school. Evidence suggests that these outcomes are both a result of direct deprivation (e.g. inadequate housing, difficulties providing healthy food, and less ability to afford books, computers and extracurricular activities) and the effect that coping with poverty has on parental stress and mental health."

### **CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP**

"It must be recognised that children's wellbeing is linked to the wider wellbeing of the environment they are growing up in. Decent housing, secure employment, a stable social security system, and good quality, affordable childcare will go a long way to supporting the wider family unit and supporting children's mental health and wellbeing."

### **USDAW**



Many submissions stressed that in order to ensure every child can achieve their aspirations, addressing child poverty, hunger and inequality must be a priority.

“While it is crucial that a children’s recovery strategy supports children with their learning and education, the strategy must also help to improve children’s experiences and outcomes more broadly. At its heart, the strategy should address the rising levels of child poverty that we have seen in recent years. Poverty impacts children’s health, education and their opportunities; without addressing poverty a children’s recovery strategy will have limited success.”

**CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP**

“Labour must reverse the increase in child poverty and ensure that all children and their families can live their lives with dignity and security and that they will have the essentials that enable them to take their part as active citizens in our society”

**BRIGHTON PAVILION CLP**

## Early years provision

Another common theme across this year’s submissions was the importance of good quality early years provision and early intervention services for children. Many submissions stressed that the first 5 years of life are crucial for a child’s development and for future academic attainment, but that provision is patchy and expensive, and that many parents are not able to access quality support in the first five years of their child’s life.

Submissions suggested increasing funding for early years provision and children’s centres, repairing the fragmented childcare market, improving staff pay and training, and increasing entitlements to free childcare.

“Investing in early years childcare and education is a pre-requisite to make Britain the best place to grow up. Getting this right is vital in working towards achieving equality of opportunity and outcome.”

**UNISON**

“[Sure Start centres] need to be reimagined and formed as a family hub in every town; “a one stop centre for all support for all families putting young children at the heart of the community and offering the support and professional assistance they need.”

**BRIGHTON PAVILION CLP**

“Labour should be calling for the government to reinstate the £1.7 billion removed from the Early Intervention Grant since 2010/2011. The LGA has been calling for this reinstatement as it will provide councils with funds that are vital to investing in local safety nets for children and families – such as Sure Start and mental health and wellbeing services. This will enable councils to tailor their response and interventions to situations locally – which will be different across council areas depending on demographics”

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION LABOUR GROUP**

## Wellbeing

The consultation document sought views on how to support children’s wellbeing and mental health. The submissions largely agreed that unhappy children are not able to learn and therefore pupils’ wellbeing should be treated equally with their academic progress.

Submissions highlighted the heightened need to support children’s wellbeing as we recover from the pandemic, but they also highlighted that young people’s mental health services were not working for the vast majority of pupils.

“For all children, but particularly those with special educational needs, recovery is not just about education that they’ve missed out on but about emotional and mental health, speech and language and socialisation.”

**ELIZABETH, NORTH WEST**

“BAME Labour believes that mental health in schools and other educational institutions must be treated as a priority. It is crucial that children and young people’s lives should return to as normal as possible without more distress or uncertainty.”

**BAME LABOUR**

A number of policy solutions were recommended including mental health first aiders in every school and increased funding for Children and Adolescents Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The National Education Union recommended a ‘whole school approach’, where schools recognise that how pupils experience their education, from school ethos and environment through to methods of teaching and learning, impacts and can protect mental health. Community also recommended incorporating mental health into the curriculum to equip pupils with lifelong tools.



## Support for teachers and schools

The consultation asked for views on the support and resources the education system needs as we emerge out of the pandemic. The urgent need to restore school funding was raised across a range of submissions, so too was the need for greater investment in the education workforce, including reducing the workload of teachers and improving professional development.

“If we are to prevent further haemorrhaging from the profession and ensure the profession remains attractive to graduates, more must be done to reduce workload and improve teacher wellbeing. Labour must ensure that any recovery plan does not increase and amplify the workload that teachers and education staff have been suffering for years”

**NATIONAL EDUCATION UNION**

## Skills

A number of submissions raised the need to improve access to further education and training for all adults, but also specifically for current school leavers who may be at higher risk of youth unemployment.

Many submissions suggested increased funding for the further education sector to increase opportunities for lifelong learning

“FE is simply too underfunded after a decade of cuts. A significant investment is needed, particularly in staff whose numbers have been cut and have seen their pay decline to the extent that working in FE is no longer seen as an attractive proposition.”

**UNISON**

