



NATIONAL
POLICY
FORUM
2021
Housing,
Local Government
and Transport

MEMBERSHIP 2021

HM Opposition

Steve Reed MP*

Lucy Powell MP

Jim McMahon MP

NEC

Jayne Taylor*

Wendy Nichols

Ian Murray

Mick Whelan

CLPs and Regions

Elly Baker – Greater London Region

Lorraine Beavers – North West Region

Simon Foster – West Midlands Region

Nicky Gavron AM – Greater London Region

Alice Grice – East Midlands Region

Neil Guild – South West Region

Carol Hayton – South East Region

Emily Horsfall – West Midlands Region

Caitlin Kane – Scottish Labour Party

Denise Robson – Northern Region

Maggie Simpson – Welsh Labour Party

Affiliates

Mick Carney – TSSA

Collette Gibson – ASLEF

Dean Gilligan – GMB

Linda Hobson – UNISON

Sina Lari – Socialist Societies

Chris Bain – Co-operative Party

Tony Woodhouse – Unite

Elected Representatives

Angela Cornforth – Association of Labour Councillors

Michael Payne – Local Government Association

*Co-convenor



The work of the Housing, Local Government and Transport Commission

Britain's broken housing market

One of the biggest areas the Commission has looked at this year is Britain's broken housing system and the need to build more genuinely affordable housing, especially new council housing. So in February 2021 the Commission held a detailed evidence session to examine the root causes of this crisis.

The Commission is concerned that there have been huge cuts to investment in new affordable homes to rent and buy. Since 2010 the number of new affordable homes built for social rent has fallen to a record low. There is a growing shortage of lifetime homes and other accommodation for people with mobility problems.

The Commission has welcomed Labour's strong commitment to tackling the systemic problems in the private rented sector including a cap on rents and an end to 'no fault' evictions. Developing the policies our country requires to build the affordable homes needed is an ongoing concern for the Commission.

Driven by submissions, representatives have been concerned by the state of homelessness in this country. Britain is too decent and too well off to put up with the scandal of homelessness. Rough sleeping has more than doubled since 2010.

A green public transport fit for the 21st century

In March of this year, the Commission received expert evidence from a range of transport voices, including local government transport leads who highlighted the fragmented structure of our public transport sector and the slowness of pace to decarbonise transport.

The rail industry created by the Government's botched privatisation is a key factor in the poor quality of service passengers receive. Since 2010 rail fares have rocketed by 42 per cent, three times faster than wages. The Commission discussed and welcomed Labour's policy to bring our railway franchises back into public ownership with the aim of improving the quality of service passengers enjoy. Representatives from our trade unions highlighted grave concerns with understaffing on our transport network which impacts on the safety of passengers, particularly women and on access for disabled people.

The Commission is clear that more attention needs to be given by the Commission, building on previous NPF policy development, to the most common

forms of transport: walking, cycling and the use of buses. Buses are the lifelines of our cities, counties, towns and villages – they reduce congestion, get people to work, drive economic growth and keep communities connected. Under this government nearly 500 bus routes have been cut every year.

Building a transport network for road, path and rail, air and water which encourages greener forms of transport will be an issue of continued interest and importance for the Commission.

Localism and local government

The Commission has given localism a great deal of consideration this year including holding an e-roundtable with members on this topic in June. Through both the consultation document and their wider work have told us that people feel politics is too distant from them. Some people worry decisions that have an impact on their lives are made in Whitehall and not in their town halls. However at a time when the Government should be taking steps to empower communities, local authorities are being forced to deliver services under tough conditions while a number of powers are being centralised. Government cuts are having a drastic impact on services and service users. Local youth centres, adult social care programmes, local museums and library services are all closing because of the Government's assault on local government.



Principles

1. Reduce inequalities through the power of local communities by building back better and greener and extending opportunity to held-back areas
2. Deliver fair longer term funding for councils
3. Collaborate with local communities to deliver devolution that works
4. Create a renewed relationship of equals between central and local government
5. Ensure everyone receives at least the living wage
6. Increase community control over local public ownership
7. Build the council and affordable homes our country needs
8. Create public transport services that serve the needs of local communities
9. Establish a new mechanism to engage locally
10. Encourage greater diversity of those engaging in local democracy

Increasing community control over public ownership to ensure our country is the best place to grow up and grow old in

The consultation responses rightly highlighted what the Commission had heard repeatedly over the past 18 months, and spoke of in their consultation document, that Covid-19 has left a devastating scar on our country and exposed deep-rooted inequality in society.

It's clear that it is incumbent on all of us, but especially those in the Labour Party to not just recognise the inequality that exists but commit ourselves to tackling these problems.

The Commission is keen to applaud the countless acts of selflessness and community spirit we have seen over the past year. Community groups have rallied around and looked after those most in need. Stories of selfless acts supporting those having to self-isolate have inspired us all. It's renewed our belief that so-called ordinary people are anything but.

These tireless acts during the pandemic remind us that local people can and want to play a fundamental role in improving their lives and the lives of those around them. They want, as we all do, to make our local areas and our country the best place to grow up and the best place to grow old in.

This leads us to a fundamental question and debate about the future relationship between citizens and the state that submissions to the Commission highlighted. Britain is one of the most centralised states in the world, and many people feel that model has failed them because it is too top-down, remote and unresponsive.

Put simply Government often stands in the way. Whether a failure to hand over power, support or funding, Whitehall is holding back local efforts to increase community involvement over local projects or local public services.

It was clear from what the Commission heard that for many they love where they live. It's already a good place to raise a family, but life could be made just that bit easier and their neighbourhood just that bit better. So the fundamental challenge for a future Labour Government is to ensure central government stops holding back local communities. This is a challenge we started to examine a year ago and will continue to do so in the run up to the next manifesto.



Submissions to the consultation

Responders to the Commission's consultation were clear that Britain's economy is the most geographically unequal in Europe, with huge variation in the strength of local economies across the country. Economic restructuring has concentrated businesses and jobs in some parts of the country while destroying the economic base of others, leaving many communities hollowed out and disillusioned.

It is clear that something must change and that local councils and local communities can be the driving force of that change.

Submissions repeatedly noted how local government plays a critical role in providing the services that local people require and that Labour has a proud history as the party of devolution.

"Devolving power where possible, and bringing people closer to the decisions that affect them, is a strong democratic principle and one that must be continued. The union is proud of the Labour Party's record as the party of devolution which has empowered the devolved nations to take decisions that are best for people there."

ASLEF

However, those that spoke with the Commission spoke extensively about how the funding cuts and sustained attacks from central Government have left local councils in an extremely tough financial position. They were clear that privatisation of local public services, often off the back of cuts to funding, has led to a reduction in control over such services and therefore a reduction in the quality of them.

"Such funding provision must also be made with a view to delivering quality services – and that means ending the privatisation of services and retaining Labour's commitment to insourcing."

UNITE THE UNION

Submissions welcomed Labour's ambition to use the power of public services to invest in Britain.

"National and local government has a choice of where it invests its money, and we welcome Labour's active interest in where that public money goes. We note the Shadow Chancellor's recent speech pledging that Labour 'make, buy and sell more in Britain'."

SHAW TRUST

Submissions did note that there is a stark divide amongst the types of people and in particular the socio-economic background of those that can and do engage in local democracy or try to influence how their local services are run.

“Poverty caused by the unequal distribution of wealth underlies the barriers faced by local people trying to shape their communities.”

BRIGHTON PAVILION CLP

The Commission also heard that one of the biggest barriers is a failure to know how to engage or that engaging is made too difficult. There was a sense that some local engagement, for example on planning or transport issues, can be seen as simply a tick box exercise. There was a recurring view that there is not a real appetite to engage with local people where they are, when they're available or how they'd like to engage.

To combat this the Commission did discuss and debate the ways that technology can be used to increase community engagement.

As the consultation document noted we have been overwhelmed during the last twelve months with submissions to the Commission noting a strong desire to ensure that politics also changes with the times. All across the world and including in some cities in the UK, councils are using new technology to open up participation, decision making and tackle the problems communities face.

However, as evidence to the Commission has shown, take up of these new innovative products is not widespread. So, we must continue to ask ourselves what can we learn from those areas that are doing this well and how can we spread its use to those places that aren't.

The Commission did also hear of the perils of using new technology and the way it can be used to exclude those that are unable or feel less comfortable using these forms of communication.

“The use of hybrid meetings can assist community engagement, including of some previously excluded disabled and vulnerable people. But technology must be carefully applied to ensure that other disabled or vulnerable people are not excluded by its use. For example, different online meeting service providers either fail to offer full (or any) captioning options so denying access to some hearing impaired people.”

BRIGHTON PAVILION CLP

One area where the Commission heard how greater community control is needed over the planning systems was with the Government's new 'developers' charter' allowing the wishes of housebuilders to trump those of local people.



"The Planning system is not fit for purpose in providing affordable housing. Developers seldom meet with the Local Plan policy targets set and have many ways of avoiding making provision. The most commonly used is claiming that developments are not viable because of various costs which Local Authorities seem unable to challenge successfully."

KEITH, SOUTH WEST

Submissions also highlighted the need to build more social and council housing as a way of making Britain an affordable place to live and therefore the best place to grow up and old in. Commission members were also concerned about the plight affecting leaseholders in the UK: both their lack of rights and the extreme challenges they face with retrofit charges to replace dangerous cladding.

"Councils need to be allowed to build new social housing and the Right to Buy should be scrapped."

ROSIE, EAST MIDLANDS

Another area where there was a keen sense that local people want greater control and influence is public transport and in particular the buses. For many our bus network is too fragmented, too expensive with too irregular a timetable.

"Ensure that everyone, including in rural areas, has easy access to regular, reasonably priced public transport."

PATRICIA, LABOUR MEMBER

Evidence given to the Commission welcomed Labour's ambition to give local authorities and local communities a say over how their buses are run and the powers to set up their own municipal bus services. A reference to creating public transport services that serve the needs of local communities was missing from the first iteration of the Commission's 10 guiding principles so has been added in to reflect the wishes of submissions. The Commission also heard at length about the issues affecting the aviation and maritime industries and welcomed Labour's efforts to fight on behalf of those employed in these industries.

Finally, submissions were clear that our political system is broken and there is only one party that seeks to stand for every voter in every region and nation. But, we must be more than idealistic as we build a radical agenda to change the country. We have set out some of the ways to do that and the Commission will continue to examine and interrogate ways to devolve power to local people to inspire them to regenerate and rejuvenate their local neighbourhoods.

