

Local Accountability in the National Education Service

Submission on behalf of Totnes and Newton Abbot CLPs. This was developed by members at a policy forum event (22/06/2019) based on knowledge of our constituencies, consideration of evidence, and our reading of the NPF briefing.

Numbering relates to the points raised in the NPF booklet of the same title.

Item 1.

As part of creating a culture which values education as a social good, we would like to re-affirm our support for the motion carried at last year's annual conference calling for all academy schools to be bought back into full public ownership and under public control. We would also like to call for the renewal of an effective Youth Service, the restoration of cuts from the Sure Start programme, and the removal of unfair tax benefits and other forms of state support for private and 'public' schools.

We would want the NES to concentrate on promoting diversity and full ability-spectrum provision within a truly comprehensive school sector. Its approach should reflect local needs and encourage a diversity of approaches, this could mean integrated 3-16 provision on a single site, or networks of partnership or federated schools offering different aspects of provision within a travel-time defined catchment area. It is our experience that teachers want to be innovative and to develop new ways of supporting different learners. Once they are not constrained to teaching to the next test or league table, and under a less punitive accountability regime, we would expect to see new methods being adopted and developed, including schooling beyond the classroom, democratic schooling etc. We would commend the Finnish model in this regard.

We believe that any element of competition between schools for a high-achieving intake, whether this be built into the concept of 'parental choice' or encouraged by it, should be actively designed out of the system as far as possible. League tables of school performance should be discontinued. In the ideal world, choosing the right school for your children should be as simple as choosing the nearest school to where you live (this would have the additional benefit of reducing the pollution caused by unnecessary rush hour journeys and reducing the cost of home to school transport).

We believe that a full review of current testing methods should take place, as a matter of urgency, and that testing should be reduced to the minimum level commensurate with promoting strong pupil progress. Student testing should not be used as a proxy for assessing schools or school improvement. Both SATs and the 11+ should be discontinued in all LA areas. Some of the alternatives which could be deployed would perhaps include: using digital records of achievement to provide a much richer picture of what students can do; portfolio based assessment and negotiated assessment; and using video technology to record and accredit skills. Such developments are particularly important if we want to give equal value to less academic forms of education and its outcomes.

We believe that the esteem in which teachers are held, their standing in the local community, the training routes available to enter the profession, and their pay structures, are all closely related. These matters should be investigated closely and new proposals developed which will engender greater trust in the publicly funded education service. Trust is at least as important as accountability. We are slowly emerging from a long period in which measurement (by way of KPIs) has been king, but this has often led to judgments based more on what can be measured than what should be measured. It is time to rely more on the experience of service users than on output measurements.

Item 2.

Clearly, all the stakeholders mentioned in this section can have a valuable contribution to make and all these voices should be included in any national, regional or sub-regional structures that emerge from consultation.

We are particularly concerned about cuts in funding and service provision in the field of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Education staff are neither properly equipped, resourced nor trained to deal with such matters. Past experiments (notably through departmental merging in LAs) have proven that mental health and education are best kept as separate provisions which work closely and supportively together, rather than being treated as a global service.

We believe the best guarantee that institutional expectations are being met is to be found through a supportive and improvement-focused inspection regime, such as Ofsted could potentially be, rather than through such mechanisms as results-based league tables. In the case of school provision, we feel that a revitalised inspection service, based on a return to the widespread deployment of publicly-employed, experienced and respected HMIs, would be the best way forward. Such a service should concentrate less on making data-centred judgements than it has in recent years, and look at what is actually going on in schools. It should not be allowed to act, as it has done recently, largely as an instrument of government policy enforcement, and should be re-envisioned exclusively as the most effective means of school improvement. This is not to say that judgements should not be made, but simply that improvement is best guaranteed by the application of expertise, experience, evidence and good advice from a trusted source. In the ideal world, the inspection regime should be able to pay respect to the unique vision and purpose of each school and how the school meets the needs of its community. The NES should not fall into the trap that a one size fits all approach to education is the best or, indeed, the only appropriate policy.

Item 3.

This is largely dealt with in other sections.

Items 4, 5 & 6

Yes, we agree that there should be a single, democratically accountable, national structure for the NES because this is the only way to ensure joined-up policy across all education sectors. However, there will also need to be second tier structures to deal with the issues presented by the varying needs of different elements of the Service. Thus, pre-school, early years and Sure Start provision, will need to be considered somewhat separately from primary provision. Secondary provision and the Youth Service will also need its own specialist oversight, as will the SEND, FE and HE sectors. Adult and continuing education has practically disappeared from view in recent years, but we would argue that this too should have its own support structure and that funding should be directed to renewing and revitalising this important provision.

In addition to a national body, we believe that there should be regional and sub-regional structures through which funding can be distributed, informed strategic planning can be undertaken, and support can be delivered. Perhaps this would look something like an improved version of the CCG model which has been rolled out in the health sector? We are inclined (living in a rural area) to think that a return to an LEA based model would be a mistake. Given the confusion in local government arising from a system which has three tiers in some places but only two in others, where geographic considerations vary widely, and where there is a permanent democratic deficit in many places arising from first-past-the-post voting, we think that a new structure would be preferable. Perhaps

this should reflect a unitary-style body at the sub-regional level, and a Regional Development Agency (RDA) style or devolved legislature kind of body at regional level?

As well as preferring not to step back to a system of LA control, as existed in the past, we are also not over-impressed with the idea of involving combined authorities or metro mayors because we think that the same system should be in place nationwide. We feel that Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Regional School Commissioners should both be abolished to make way for bodies which are more fit for purpose and incorporate proper democratic accountability. We would favour the introduction of an entirely new and untarnished structure, as outlined above, as the best way to promote the new approach represented by the NES.

There are numerous examples of current forms of governance, for example in academy trusts, having become discredited through scandal and failure. At a local level, therefore, and particularly at an institutional level, we believe that democratic accountability and good governance are best served through the medium of strong governing bodies. These would be peopled with representatives of the local community, service users, staff and other key stakeholders, none of whom should have a pecuniary interest in the institutions they are responsible for. These governors should be given the funding, training, support and powers required to hold individual institutions or services to account.