



The Labour Party: Policy Positions on Key Education Issues

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PLMR

Introduction

A criticism of the Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer in some quarters has been its apparent reluctance to provide a clear and inspiring vision for the country. The reasons for this recalcitrance are, however, perhaps, understandable. In the midst of complex variables – from the cost-of-living crisis and spiralling energy costs, through to the residual impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on educational attainment – the party has been cautious about committing to policies until very recently.

The replacement of Kate Green MP as Shadow Education Secretary reflected this lack of 'cut through', but the arrival of Bridget Phillipson MP in the role has provided more pace. Indeed, with a relatively stable shadow team now in place, the party is beginning to provide concrete policy positions.

A recent indication of the party's approach came through the Council for Skills Advisers' report, ['Learning and Skills for Economic Recovery, Social Cohesion and a more equal Britain'](#). Commissioned by the Labour Party and led by Lord Blunkett, Labour's Education Secretary between May 1997 and June 2001, the report outlined dozens of practical reforms which Blunkett recommended be implemented by a Labour government.

In the report, Blunkett closed his introduction with a message of thanks to Tim Waters and Vicky Salt, both key policy advisers to Phillipson. As such, and although not fully adopted as formal Labour Party policy, we can perhaps see it as an intellectual precursor to part of the party's manifesto.

Another area which seems to be crystallising is the early years. Phillipson has become increasingly vocal in this policy area, calling for a system which increases the support available to new parents, and reforms the childcare system. This ethos is supported by the party's calls for more breakfast clubs at schools, and previous advocacy for Marcus Rashford and The Food Foundation's campaign in support of Free School Meals during the peak of the pandemic. A final clear policy position is on independent schools, and the Party's desire to change the tax rules for these institutions.

However, Labour's views on other areas remain ambiguous. For instance, while Phillipson appears lukewarm on the multi-academy trust system – which was established, of course, by Lord Adonis when a Schools Minister in 2003 during the second Blair Government – the party has to date not suggested changing it, and indeed the Shadow Schools Minister, Stephen Morgan MP, is known to be a keen supporter of academies and academy trusts where they perform well.

Similarly, while the party is warming up to T Levels – the new vocational qualification designed under the Conservatives – they remain uncertain over the extent to which funding for additional qualifications, such as BTECs, should be removed. More so, though the party has suggested it will seek to rethink how universities are funded, there is no confirmation as yet whether this will mean a return to the Corbynite promise to abolish tuition fees. As a result, there are a number of areas which remain up in the policy air.

Yet with eyes firmly on an upcoming General Election, which must be held by January 2025 at the latest, the Labour Party's manifesto will begin to take shape in the coming months – and their promises for the sector made concrete. Providing a precis of the party's position, Sir Keir Starmer has said: "I want every parent in the country to be able to send their child to a great state school. On top of that, 40 per cent of young people leave compulsory education without essential qualifications. What does that say about their future? We will not put up with that. That is why Labour will launch the most ambitious school improvement plan ever."

In this briefing, PLMR brings together Labour's positions on key education issues, signalling what we may be able to expect from the Party's next manifesto – and their policies if they were to form the next Government.



Schools

Academies and Free Schools

- Despite being the party which introduced academies to the English education system, the Labour Party has long been critical of the system. However, within the Shadow Cabinet that view has very much been watered down in recent years, and in March 2022, [during her speech to the Association of School College Leaders](#), Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said that "multi-academy trusts have become central to how many schools are run."
- Nonetheless, she focused on the need for effective oversight of the system, saying that "inspection of [multi-academy trusts] is missing" while at the same time "local authorities have responsibilities that matter, but without the powers to deliver", all of which she said needed to change. As part of this, she called for Ofsted to be able to hold multi-academy trusts "properly accountable for the provision within schools."
- A few months later, in July 2022, the Labour Party [put forward](#) an amendment to the Schools Bill, arguing for all state schools to follow the national curriculum, follow local admissions policies and ensure that all academy teachers have qualified teacher status.
- Most recently, Shadow Schools Minister Stephen Morgan told the Labour Party Conference in October 2022 that he and his team will focus on "improving outcomes, not meddling with structures" (reported by [Schools Week](#)). He went on to say that Labour will not support forced academisation, but that it has also pledged to leave academy trusts alone, while protecting the rights of single-academy trusts to continue to stand alone.
- Morgan also said that the Labour Party did not believe academies are perfect, and reiterated Phillipson's earlier commitments to making sure the national curriculum is taught in all schools and that Ofsted is inspecting multi-academy trusts, as well as declaring that there are "governance mechanisms and accountability arrangements that [the Labour Party] wants to see change."
- Meanwhile, although the Labour Party hasn't said much on free schools in recent years, during Jeremy Corbyn's leadership [in 2019](#), the then-Shadow Education Secretary (and current Deputy Leader) Angela Rayner said that Labour would "end the inefficient free schools programme and allow local authorities to open new schools in their area." These has been no repeat of this position under Starmer, however.

Role of Local Authorities / Regional Directors / Regional Oversight

- Even in large overarching Labour documents, local authorities are not mentioned, including in its [Children's Recovery Plan](#), which was launched in response to the pandemic about the initiatives Labour would roll out to support children and promote education if they were in government.
- In its 2019 manifesto, the Labour Party stated the education system was "over-centralised, inefficient and undemocratic" and promised to "end the fragmentation and marketisation of our school system by bringing free schools and academies back under control of the people who know them best – parents, teachers and local communities".
- The Labour Party did not explain at the time what that would mean or what regional involvement would look like in the education system – and the current shadow education team has remained quiet on this topic.

Grammar Schools

- While Phillipson has focused heavily on independent schools, she has stated that the country's 163 state-funded selective secondary schools are "not a priority". In an [interview with inews](#), when asked if Labour would seek to phase out grammars, she stated: "I'm more interested in what goes on inside the classroom than the name above the door."
- Shadow Schools Minister, Stephen Morgan MP, has made his views clear when speaking to [Schools Week](#) in September 2022. Morgan said he would be against the vote to lift the ban on new grammar schools, stating: "Frankly, all the evidence that I've seen suggests that grammar schools don't deliver the outcomes that I would want to see. And they're not popular amongst parents. I will always be evidence based in terms of the policy making that I make. So it's a no from me."

Faith Schools

- Despite some [historical concern](#) over the party's approach to faith schools, Labour has been clear that it will maintain faith schools in the state education system.
- Baroness Wilcox, the Shadow spokesperson for education in the Lords, [stated in June](#) that "the place of religion and belief in the education system is incredibly complex", and stressed the importance of breaking down stigma, as well as ensuring that non-religious children in faith schools "should not be made to feel left out if they opt out."

Independent Schools

- Labour's education campaign is currently largely based on changing the tax system for independent schools. Part of the money recouped from this move would be invested into teacher recruitment and retention across the wider sector as part of its so-called [National Excellence Programme](#).
- This would entail the removal of charitable status, which applies to many independent schools, along with exemptions on VAT and business tax. Labour says this will raise £1.7 billion, although independent schools dispute this figure, and the impact of the move, with the Independent Schools Council's chief executive Julie Robinson stating: "Labour's proposal to charge VAT on independent school fees will have the greatest impact on the families who work the hardest to pay the fees."
- In an [op-ed for The Times Red Box](#), Phillipson stated: "Labour in government will have to make difficult choices but just like ending non-dom tax loopholes — the proceeds of which Labour would use to fund breakfast clubs for every primary school child in England — removing private schools' tax breaks is an easy one."
- Concerns over the policy have also been raised by the headteacher union [ASCL, which has said](#) it would lead to the closure of some independent schools and displaced pupils who would need to be educated in the state sector, higher school fees and cuts to bursary-assisted places as well as reductions in the partnership work independent and state schools undertake.

School Sites and Buildings

- Labour has not yet announced any specific policies on school buildings. However, there appears to be a clear direction of travel. Morgan has [said](#) it would be a priority for Labour to "make sure we have learning environments fit for the future".
- Morgan has also strongly criticised the Government for allowing school buildings to fall into disrepair. In a debate in May 2022 he [said](#): "The reality is that the schools estate is crumbling after 12 years of Tory negligence. In 2019, the Government's own survey revealed that one in six schools required urgent repairs, and the Minister's own Department is warning that some school sites present a risk to life."

Free School Meals (FSM)

- The Labour Party is yet to announce any new or specific policies on existing Free School Meal (lunch/dinners) provision in its latest iteration, beyond maintaining their broad and long-standing support for the notion. However, at the Labour Party Conference in September, Phillipson unveiled plans to roll-out fully funded universal breakfast clubs for every primary school in England, which the party said would help to drive up standards in maths, reading and writing, and give parents "choices".
- Forming part of its "modern childcare system", Labour's plan would see money sent directly to schools so they can buy their own food and choose how to staff the clubs. This pledge would cost the taxpayer around [£186m each year](#) and has received significant support from the school food and charities sector, including the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and provider Magic Breakfast.
- Beyond this, not a huge amount has been said over the last 12 months by Labour Shadow Ministers on the policy of FSM. However, the party was extremely vocal about the importance of FSM provision being available to the 1.4 million eligible children, including explicitly through the school holidays, when the Conservative Government U-turned during the pandemic. This followed footballer and campaigner Marcus Rashford's call for action. This included forcing a vote in the Commons by tabling a [Labour motion in January 2021](#), with then Prime Minister Boris Johnson accusing Labour of "playing politics".
- Labour has similarly highlighted the increasing number of children that would since be eligible for the FSM scheme as a result of the pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis, as well as being hugely critical of attainment data which [highlights the gap in grades between those on FSM and their peers](#), which in 2021 had increased by almost a third in only three years.
- [Labour's Deputy Leader Angela Rayner](#), who received free school meals when growing up, is consistently vocal about free school meal provision, declaring it as a topic and policy that should not require discussion.

Ofsted

- In the 2019 General Election, Labour said it would scrap the ["unfit for purpose"](#) Ofsted and overhaul the school inspection regime, replacing it with a new inspectorate for education.
- However, under Starmer, Labour says it will retain but reform Ofsted. Speaking at the annual conference of ASCL in March, Phillipson said that Ofsted "operates in a way that is often too high stakes, and where the risks of a 'bad' inspection outweigh the rewards of a good one".
- Asked by Schools Week about her plans, Phillipson said she wanted to "look at the way in which both gradings are considered but also what parents might learn from that report and from the data that's published".
- Labour's Deputy Leader Angela Rayner, who received free school meals when growing up, is consistently vocal about free school meal provision, declaring it as a topic and policy that should not require discussion.

Teacher Training, Recruitment and Retention

- [Phillipson has criticised the Government](#) and the now scrapped Schools Bill for being "devoid of serious ideas on the major issues of... teacher recruitment and retention". She went on to state a Labour government would "recruit thousands of new teachers, filling vacancies and skills gaps that have opened-up during a decade of Conservative government". However she didn't state exactly how this would happen.
- [Angela Rayner MP has said](#) "through our National Education Service, Labour will invest in our schools and provide ring-fenced funding to give teachers the pay rise they deserve", in turn identifying pay as a key reason teachers are leaving the profession.
- The Labour Party is also discussing the creation of a [National Excellence Programme](#) for schools which would focus on recruitment, Ofsted reforms and CPD. This would involve giving teachers a sabbatical every five years to help teachers feel refreshed in an effort to boost retention.
- Labour says it would [enhance training opportunities](#) to keep teachers in the workforce.

Testing, Examinations, Qualifications and Curriculum

- Labour has said it wants to promote a more creative curriculum which has less of a focus on exams.
- [In a report of the Council of Skills Advisers](#), created to inform the Labour Party, the group said rather than focusing on exams, it believes the education system must dedicate more time and energy towards developing skills for the future to create a more productive economy which generates growth. The Council concluded by backing a reform of education and skills delivery "at all levels". While this is not official Labour Party policy, it will be an important external pressure the party will need to respond to.
- This reduced focus on testing and academic studies would lead to a greater emphasis on developing world-leading apprenticeships which train young people for the workplace of the future and help them meet the needs of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

- A reduction in focus on tests would also enable learning to be viewed as life-long, which would boost the productivity and prospects of all generations, Labour says in their Skills Advisors report.
- In addition, the Labour Party says it would develop a ["learning and skills passport"](#), based on appropriate assessment, designed to build, incrementally, a profile that could be added to at any time and in a variety of ways throughout working life. As such, the Party says it will introduce ["multimodal assessments so a young person's progress is no longer measured solely through written exams"](#) and argues this will ensure our education system is ready for the future.
- In terms of qualifications, Labour has said it would "update and refine" A-levels and T-levels and ensure there are "clear routes from Level 2 for those unsure of their next steps, such as through strengthened BTEC diplomas."
- Labour would also look to bring back bespoke qualifications and to broaden qualification providers beyond the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and Ofqual in the post-16 arena.
- League tables would therefore be measured against the variety of options available to young people, and the skills they equip students with, rather than academic performance.

English and Maths

- Labour has been vocal on the pressing issue of the attainment gap in English and maths and the need to prioritise greater investment in areas of deprivation/where there are schools in greatest need of support. However, it has not yet set out any firm policies in this area.
- Some recent research conducted by the party highlights the regional disparities in English and maths GCSE outcomes. The study, carried out in August 2022, found that [fewer than four in ten](#) students in Knowsley achieved a pass in English and Maths last year, more than 20 percentage points lower than the national average. They also highlighted that in areas including Trafford, Kingston-upon-Thames and Buckinghamshire, more than seven in ten young people achieved a pass in both subjects in 2021.

Behaviour and Attendance

- As part of their wider plan for better mental health support for young people across the country, Labour pledge to work specifically to boost quality mental health support in every school.
- Labour says it would do this by [giving every child the support they need](#) to transition back to school and manage personal challenges, with access to qualified in-school counselling staff alongside boosting wellbeing through extra activities.
- The party would also introduce an [Education Recovery Premium](#). This would support every child to reach their potential by investing in children who have faced the greatest disruption during the pandemic from early years to further education, and double the Pupil Premium for children in key transition years, delivering additional support for children who need it most.



Further Education

- With the backdrop of rising inflation, Bridget Phillipson used the Association of Colleges' (AOC) 2022 conference in November to state that the Party is not able to commit to increased funding for Further Education. [She said](#): "...the reality is we will face a very tough situation... and that will force us to make some very difficult choices." Despite this, she confirmed that "colleges are central to the ambition Labour has in education."

T Levels

- Despite Labour originally being [apprehensive](#) about the introduction of T Levels due to its belief that the initial timeline would cause a series risk to taxpayers' money and would be a failure, the party has since become more supportive of the new suite of technical qualifications.
- In 2021, Labour's Shadow Apprenticeships Minister Toby Perkins [said](#) it is very unlikely the party would scrap T levels if it came to power, although he did go on to say that they would make some changes to the qualifications, namely around the work experience requirement.
- However, Labour has also been critical of the plans to scrap BTECs in favour of T Levels, [believing](#) that this will "leave many students without a viable pathway after their GCSEs, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds."
- Additionally, in a July 2022 debate on colleges and employers, Toby Perkins, also [stated](#): "Nine out of 10 T-level providers have failed to meet even the Government's own modest recruitment targets, and an FE Week investigation found that employers' refusal to offer work placements was cited as a key reason for that failure."
- He went on to reassure that "Labour wants T-levels to be a success, but courses in crucial areas such as digital, health and science have the lowest enrolment, and employers and students are being failed".

Apprenticeships

- The Labour Party has [repeatedly criticised](#) the Conservative government for underfunding apprenticeships, which the party believes has played a huge role in the decline in uptake, especially amongst those from [disadvantaged](#) backgrounds.
- In 2019, before she was Shadow Education Minister, Phillipson [criticised](#) the government for what she said was its failing approach to apprenticeships. She stated: "Access to apprenticeships is getting worse, while take-up rates have been falling – in our area alone, the number of apprenticeship starts has dropped by almost 500 in the space of a year. Apprenticeships provide life-changing opportunities to young people, and help businesses prepare for future skills challenges. I'll keep pressing ministers to ensure there are more available in our area."
- In order to combat this fall in apprenticeships – Labour has [called](#) on the Government to introduce a wage subsidy. The party has said this would be funded from underspent funding in the apprenticeship levy.
- In September 2022, Labour [announced](#) its plans for skills that included a range of policy points relating to apprenticeships.

- One of the leading changes the party announced was plans to rework the apprenticeships levy into a 'Growth and Skills Levy'. The Growth and Skills Levy would enable firms to spend up to 50% of their levy contributions, including underspend, on non-apprenticeship training including modular courses and functional skills courses to tackle key skills gaps. This widening of the levy was further committed to during Phillipson's speech at the 2022 AOC Conference.
- In a report commissioned by the Labour Party and written by former Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett, it [suggested](#) that Labour need to improve support and incentives to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to take on apprentices. The report recommended they do this through the acceleration of "shared apprenticeships" with larger employers and consideration of a Skills Tax Credit.

Qualifications Review

- The Government's Qualifications Review was commissioned to examine the range of qualifications level 3 and below. Addressing the Federation of Awarding Bodies conference in November 2021, [Labour heavily criticised](#) the proposed defunding of BTEC qualifications that overlap with T-Levels, warning it would disproportionately impact health and retail sectors.
- Internal Labour analysis found that almost one million workers hold BTECs as their highest level of qualification, including 136,000 in retail and wholesale, and 105,000 in health and social work.

Skills

- [The Report of the Council of Skills Advisers](#), prepared for Labour by Lord Blunkett, [recommends a series of reforms](#) to boost skills across the UK. Labour has formally adopted some, though not all, of these.

Labour's [new Skills agenda](#) released in September includes:

- **Growth and Skills Levy:** at the Labour Party Conference [Labour announced](#) it would turn the Apprenticeships Levy into a 'Growth and Skills Levy' enabling firms to spend up to 50% of their levy contributions (including current underspend), on non-apprenticeship training, including modular courses and functional skills courses to tackle key skills gaps. Labour claims that reserving 50% of the Growth and Skills Levy for apprenticeships will protect existing apprenticeship provision. However, [Lord Blunkett has recently distanced himself](#) from the 50% figure pledged, saying further dialogue is needed.
- **Skills England:** establishment of a new expert body, Skills England, to oversee the national effort to meet the skills needs of the coming decade across all regions and ensure delivery on England's Climate Investment Pledge.
- **Devolution:** better alignment of skills policy with regional economic policy and local labour markets by devolving and combining various adult education skills funding streams to current and future combined authorities.

Additional recommendations from Lord Blunkett's report that have not been adopted by Labour:

- **A skills tax credit for SMEs:** potentially modelled on the Research and Development (R&D) tax credit, [this would allow employers](#) to deduct 230 per cent of the cost of apprenticeships and accredited training from their tax bills, with a higher skills credit, allowing 300 per cent of training costs to be deducted in priority areas for levelling up.
- **Establish a National Skills Taskforce:** this would be comprised of key players including further and higher education bodies, trade unions, central and local government and employers to develop long-term plans and ensure devolved decision making meets national objectives. The report also called for greater co-ordination between government departments to develop skills policies.
- **Devolution:** the report recommended the devolution of decision-making and spending wherever possible. The National Skills Taskforce would simplify the network of various local bodies responsible for skills, such as local enterprise partnerships, mayoral combined authorities and local authorities. It also recommended transitioning local skills improvement plans to become an ongoing process rather than a one-off exercise.
- **Individual learner accounts:** Labour seeks to reintroduce Individual Learner Accounts, a short-lived Labour policy from the early 2000s which was axed due to fraudulent abuse of the software system. This would share the cost of learning between the individual, employer and the state, and feature in the devolved budgets for combined authorities. Labour hopes this will incentivise employers to co-fund training and expand the range of training available to workers.
- **Learning and skills 'passports':** these would develop individual profiles for learners to add to throughout their life as they develop skills records and qualifications.
- **Public procurement contracts to include upskilling:** the report says public procurement and supply chains should seek to boost apprenticeship recruitment as part of their conditions or contain clauses relating to skills and training. Labour says it is "vital" for social value and should be evidenced in contracts as to how apprenticeships will be created.
- **Right to retrain (adult education):** Progression pathways for adults must be opened up, with plans for a new "right to retrain" providing more flexible access to free courses for adults, specifically a first level 2 qualification from an approved provider. The report recommends that financial support for adult learners should also be expanded elsewhere, specifically identifying a need to provide support for the adult population to improve basic numeracy, literacy and digital skills with entry and level and level 1 courses.



Higher Education

- A flagship policy of Labour's 2017 and 2019 manifestos [was a promise to scrap university fees](#) but with mounting pressure from the sector and from within the party it is [looking more likely](#) that Labour will not maintain this pledge going into the next election.
- Labour is [expected](#) to announce a sustainable funding plan for universities with Matt Western, Shadow HE minister, recently acknowledging the need for a plan to address increasing student numbers.
- One option that has been suggested as being considered by Labour is the introduction of [a graduate tax](#) which would see the traditional 'fee' structure replaced with a tax on graduate salaries which would be proportional to earnings. This would see a fundamental shift in the funding model for universities without simply abolishing fees.
- Phillipson [has spoken out](#) against former Blair-era targets regarding the number of people who go to university. Instead, she spoke in favour of supporting any student who wants to go to university to go.
- [In a recent speech](#), Shadow HE spokesperson Matt Western condemned the Government's proposed limits on international students, indicating that Labour recognises the importance of international communities within universities as a vehicle of development, economic investment and diplomatic relations.
- In June 2022, Phillipson named the Government's focus on the Higher Education Freedom of Speech Bill, which would introduce a requirement for universities and student unions to protect freedom of speech, as [a distraction](#) from its failure to address wider challenges in the sector.
- The [Higher Education \(Freedom of Speech\) Bill](#) is currently in its Third Reading in the House of Lords, having passed all stages in the House of Commons despite [attempts by Labour](#) to vote against the bill calling it a hugely divisive and harmful "hate speech bill".



Early Years

- Labour is looking to plug the gap between the end of parental leave and the start of the 30 hours of free childcare, which kicks in for working parents once a child is three. "There is for most families no support offered, yet most women want to be able to work when they've reached the end of their parental leave," Phillipson told [The Guardian](#) during a policy research trip to Estonia.
- To achieve this, councils in England will be encouraged to open more high-quality maintained nurseries as part of ambitious Labour plans to transform childcare and ease pressure on struggling parents.
- For now, all policy development comes with a health warning, that until Labour knows the state of the public finances it is impossible to make firm promises. Policymakers are, however, looking at repurposing some of the money already in what is currently seen by many as a fragmented and unwieldy childcare system.

The Labour Party believes access to high-quality, affordable childcare is essential for working families to prosper. According to the [Labour Party's data](#):

- 12,000 early education and childcare providers have been lost since 2015
- There has been a net loss of nearly 3,000 childcare providers this year alone; and 85% of childcare businesses in England are making a loss or only breaking even
- Analysis from the Sutton Trust shows that the poorest three- and four-year-olds are already missing out on vital early learning and end up starting school behind their peers.

If the Labour Party wins the next election, it has promised to revolutionise the childcare system, through:

- "A renewed focus on the early years", as part of its Children's Recovery Plan.
- An increase the early years pupil premium from £302 a year to £1,345 a year, said Phillipson at the [National Education Union's annual conference](#).
- The party [said](#) that this investment was equivalent to "almost 21 million hours of funded childcare".
- The pledges are part of the party's Children's Recovery Plan, which proposes policies for allowing all children to "play, learn and develop in the post-Covid period".

Building on this, the Labour Party also specifies in its [Stronger Future for Families](#) proposal:

- All families should have access to high-quality, affordable childcare available within walking distance.
- Every child should have access to vital early learning which sets them up for life and the nation's childcare system should be affordable and high quality, supporting working parents.
- Schools should take their rightful place at the heart of our communities, providing wraparound childcare support and activities that have been stripped away by a decade of Conservative cuts, and with a strengthened link between early years services and schools.

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communications + impact