

COMPREHENSIVE FUTURE

Response to “Towards a National Education Service” Labour Party consultation

Comprehensive Future warmly welcomes this consultation. Whilst supporting the ethos and aims of Labour’s proposed National Education Service charter, we believe there are two specific areas where Labour should make a stronger commitment to change: selection and admissions.

Comprehensive Future is a non-aligned all-party organisation with supporters in all the main political parties. Our vision is a system where every school welcomes local children of all abilities and offers an excellent quality of education. We believe this requires a fair and inclusive admissions system and an end to the 11-plus. We are not affiliated to the Labour Party but much of the ethos running through *Towards a National Education Service* matches our own values. This submission reflects detailed discussions with our supporters and members.

- We warmly welcome the fact that the NES seeks to address *“both the social and economic challenges that Britain faces in the years ahead.”* Too often social challenges, such as community cohesion and the emotional wellbeing of children, are overlooked in the pursuit of academic results.
- We share the belief expressed in *Towards a National Education Service* that *“everyone, whatever their background, should be given the opportunity to reach their potential, to succeed not just in the world of work but in their own development.”*
- We agree on the importance of looking to the future and that *“as new industries emerge and the world of work changes, equipping people with new skills throughout their lives will be imperative.”*

We believe that these three statements are incompatible with a selective education system.

- Selective education does not address social challenges - it causes them. Tens of thousands of young children are branded a failure by the 11-plus every single year. In the words of Dr Nadia Siddiqui, Assistant Professor at Durham University: *“In areas with selective schools, the system leads to increased social and economic segregation between schools which has consequences for huge numbers of pupils in the non-selective schools such as lower self-esteem, poorer role models, poorer relationships and distorted sense of justice.”*ⁱ Evidence also shows that the 11-plus is not colour-blind. In Buckinghamshire white children are twice as likely to pass the 11-plus as children of Pakistani heritage, leading a parents’ group to dub the test *“a legalised form of discrimination.”*ⁱⁱ This divisiveness is the polar opposite of what our country needs at a time of growing social unrest and rising hate crime.
- Selective education does not enable everyone, whatever their background, to reach their potential – it rewards the better-off and often the very wealthy. New research from Durham University has conclusively proven that grammar schools do not further social mobility: *“the apparent success of grammar schools is simply due to the pupils coming from more advantaged social backgrounds and already having higher academic attainment at age 11.”*ⁱⁱⁱ With more affluent parents spending up to £5,000

on private tutors to prepare their children from the 11-plus^{iv}, it is little wonder that grammar schools are preserves of privilege. Just 2% of grammar school pupils receive free school meals (compared to 14% in other schools) and just 0.3% grammar school pupils have special educational needs (compared to 4% in other schools).^v

- Selective education is utterly unfit to prepare young people for the changing world of work. The 11-plus was a mid-20th century idea which reflected the assumptions of the mid-20th century economy. Deindustrialisation, the rise of the professions and the growth of the SME sector meant that the 11-plus was no longer fit for purpose by the 1960s. Further economic change means that it is now utterly archaic. Rather than a system which grooms a small elite for management and consigns the majority to low expectations, we urgently need an education system which equips every young person with the skills and confidence to thrive in today's global economy. This is why international education researcher Lucy Crehan has stated that *“a move back towards grammar schools would be a step further away from our most successful competitors, and towards educational isolationism”*^{vi} and why former Ofsted Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw has argued that, *“if our international competitors think that the future is comprehensive, why shouldn't we?”*^{vii}

That the Labour Party is acutely aware of these issues has been shown in the impassioned and effective front bench campaign waged against the establishment of new grammar schools in 2016-17. We believe that the wider membership of the Labour Party would like the frontbench to go further: we note that, at the time of writing, more than 20 of the 79 online submissions to this consultation call for an end to all selection – more than any other education issue.

It is also very important to remember that academic selection is only the most visible way that school admissions are skewed in favour of the affluent and well-connected. Many schools use needlessly complex entry requirements, suspiciously designed catchment areas or “voluntary” financial contributions to select their intake by stealth. These unfair practices must end.

This consultation represents the ideal opportunity for Labour to bring coherence to its selection and schools admissions policy.

As well as passionately opposing new grammar schools, Labour should commit any future National Education Service to end 11-plus testing by a specified date and to propose a mechanism, and timescale, for local consultation on the most effective means of managing the transition to a fully comprehensive system of secondary schools.

In addition, Labour should commit to end poor admissions practices by publishing a new School Admissions Code, with which all publicly funded schools must comply, describing best practice in admissions policies.

Responses to the questions posed by *Towards a National Education Service*

- What should a National Education Service be for and what values should it and the draft charter embody?

We broadly support the ethos of the draft charter. Too often education is reduced to the arid pursuit of grades alone. We warmly agree with the first key principle of the draft charter that *“education has intrinsic value in giving all people access to the common body of knowledge we share, and practical value in allowing all to*

participate fully in our society.” We strongly support the universality outlined in the second key principle and we are pleased that key principle three binds all providers into the charter.

This must include the 163 remaining grammar schools. A system which has different rules for comprehensive and selective areas cannot be regarded as a truly *National Education System*.

- What amendments, if any, should be made to the principles outlined in the draft charter for the National Education Service?

We warmly welcome the fact that the first substantive page of *Towards a National Education Service* celebrates Labour’s “*establishment of the comprehensive school system.*” We would like the draft charter to specifically commit to the full implementation of the comprehensive ideal. This could easily be achieved by adding the words ‘fully comprehensive’ to the second key principle, making it: “*The National Education Service shall provide education that is free at the point of use, **fully comprehensive**, available universally and throughout life.*”

We support the commitment to public accountability detailed in key principle eight. However, we believe that this should not just cover resource allocation but should also extend to admissions^{viii}. We therefore propose that key principle eight is amended slightly to read: “*The National Education Service shall be accountable to the public, communities, and parents and children that it serves. Schools, colleges, and other public institutions within the National Education Service should be rooted in their communities, with parents and communities empowered, via appropriate democratic means, to influence change where it is needed and ensure that the education system meets their needs. The appropriate democratic authority **will oversee local admissions** and will set, monitor and allocate resources, ensuring that they meet the rights, roles, and responsibilities of individuals and institutions.*”

- What additional principles should be considered for the charter of the NES?

We believe that, with the two small changes above, the ten key principles are ideal and that no additional principles are required.

- What barriers currently exist to cooperation between education institutions, and what steps can be taken to remove them and ensure that cooperation is a central principle of our education system?

We fully support the principle of an education system based around cooperation rather than competition. This is the polar opposite of the 11-plus system which crudely divides children into winner and losers. A truly cooperative system built around the needs of each child is simply impossible where selection is allowed to continue. This is why Labour fought such an impassioned campaign against new grammar schools and this is why Labour must commit to phase out existing selection under the aegis of an NES.

- Through which channels and mechanisms should the public be able to hold educational institutions to account, and how should this vary across different educational bodies?

We strongly support moves to empower communities to hold schools to account: too often parents face a ‘David and Goliath’ scenario when challenging unfair practices. This is particularly the case with admissions where far too much covert selection is allowed to go unchallenged. We would like to see a new School Admissions Code,

with which all publicly funded schools must comply, describing best practice in admissions policies. We believe that this should be backed up by robust local systems with new powers for investigating and correcting breaches of this code.

In conclusion...

Comprehensive Future is supportive of the Labour Party's plan to establish an NES and we believe that *Towards a National Education Service* is an excellent start. We are fully supportive of the ethos of Labour's plans but strongly encourage the party to take a more robust position on selective education and unfair admissions practices.

It is important to establish an NES which addresses social as well as economic challenges, which enables everyone from every background to fulfil their potential, and which looks to the future rather than the past. This simply cannot be achieved while turning a blind eye to the remaining 163 grammar schools, particularly given that these schools are now being used as a base from which to once again expand selective education.

The evidence is absolutely overwhelming: selective education harms the emotional wellbeing of young children; it divides communities, including along race grounds, and it has zero impact on social mobility. This is why the highest performing education systems in the world have rejected it. Labour should do the same and have the courage to match its impassioned opposition to new grammar schools with a corresponding commitment to phase out existing selection.

Comprehensive Future therefore supports the proposals made in *Towards a National Education Service*, subject to two small additions to the key principles of the NES Charter.

Moving forward we call upon Labour to build upon this charter with two clear policies:

- 1. To commit to end 11-plus testing by a specified date and to propose a mechanism, and timescale, for local consultation on the most effective means of managing the transition to a fully comprehensive system of secondary schools**
- 2. To publish a new School Admissions Code, with which all publicly funded schools must comply, describing best practice in admissions policies. This code should be backed up by robust local systems with new powers for investigating and correcting breaches of this code**

ⁱ <https://www.dur.ac.uk/news/newsitem/?itemno=34136>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/sep/12/tutor-11plus-test-grammar-schools-disadvantaged-pupils>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.dur.ac.uk/news/newsitem/?itemno=34136>

^{iv} <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/parents-spend-5000-private-tutors-10038117>

^v <https://www.dur.ac.uk/news/newsitem/?itemno=34136>

^{vi} <https://capx.co/what-can-britain-learn-from-the-worlds-best-schools/>

^{vii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/sir-michael-wilshaws-speech-at-the-fasna-autumn-conference>

^{viii} Admissions policy is explored in more detail here <https://comprehensivefuture.org.uk/alan-parker-next-steps-towards-genuinely-successful-comprehensive-system/>