

NEC Update, November 2022

The full NEC will meet in Newcastle on 29 November. Before then, here is a report on various meetings since conference.

Organisation Committee, 8 November 2022

Reorganisation Postponed

Back in July the committee agreed to reorganise English CLPs along new Westminster boundaries from 1 January 2023. The committee now decided to defer reorganisation until after the 2023 conference. This makes sense in light of continuing issues with membership systems, staff availability during transition, and a possible general election before July 2023 on current boundaries. I regret that official advice continued to refer to “early 2023” through October, and some regions told CLPs to cancel AGMs unnecessarily. (One region is said to be extending the ban for another year, which is not reasonable.) However, although late, this is the right decision. The boundary commission’s proposals were still being analysed but look generally sensible, and thanks were recorded to the staff for all their work on Labour’s submissions.

Questions included how CLPs with all-member meetings would combine with delegate-based CLPs, and what happens to MPs and candidates selected on existing boundaries. Some information is available at

<https://labour.org.uk/activist-hub/governance-and-legal-hub/clp-hub/clp-reorganising-faq/>

with more to follow in due course. I asked for an updated implementation plan with new timelines, and for CLP secretaries to be kept informed of developments. I was also promised that the NEC briefing on membership systems, originally scheduled for July, would take place before Christmas.

The list of CLPs in special measures was unchanged, with some dating back to 2017. Progress has been hindered by membership data problems, and I suggested that reorganisation might be an opportunity to move forwards, particularly where new CLPs include bits of those currently in special measures.

Conference Timetable

Delaying reorganisation simplifies arrangements for annual conference, with dates as below. CLPs will be informed in January, so this is early notice for those who like to plan ahead.

Friday 13 January 2023	First mailing to CLPs, including deadlines (and presumably delegate entitlement based on membership at 31 December 2022)
12 noon Friday 23 June 2023	Closing date for delegates, nominations for national committees and constitutional amendments to be debated at conference 2024
5 p.m. Thursday 21 September 2023	Deadline for motions
12 noon Friday 29 September 2023	Deadline for emergency motions

Conference will again be in Liverpool, and run from Sunday 8 October to Wednesday 11 October 2023.

CLPs may nominate for two places on the conference arrangements committee (CAC), including at least one woman, and three places on the national constitutional committee (NCC) with no gender restrictions.

Future Candidates

The committee noted lists of reselected MPs and new candidates and endorsed 13 MPs without a trigger ballot where they were on maternity leave, in a constituency which was suspended, or who had become Labour MPs since the 2019 election. The last category included three by-election winners as well as former Conservative Christian Wakeford. Some members were concerned about the latter, but others argued that to win the next election we had to attract people who did not previously support Labour. I would add that earlier floor-crossers – Alan Howarth, Shaun Woodward – moved to safer seats after defecting, while Christian Wakeford is taking the more difficult course of staying to fight his marginal seat for Labour. The paper was approved without a vote.

Of the first 40 new candidates 19 were women and 21 were men, which was encouraging. Seventeen per cent declared a disability and 22% identified as LGBT+. However only six were from an ethnic minority background, all of Asian heritage, and the committee hoped that diversity would increase going forward.

The NEC-led longlisting panels have had mixed reviews. From my experience maintaining close to 50% women is challenging, and where candidates are already longlisted through affiliate nominations the panel has less freedom to add further applicants. In some seats the panels may lack the local knowledge needed to identify and interview strong potential candidates, especially in a crowded field. So my advice to aspiring candidates, especially men, is to seek early nomination by a trade union or socialist society, as that guarantees longlisting unless there are due diligence issues.

Much has been written about reasons for barring candidates, and I would just comment that from my enquiries Twitter does not necessarily include the whole truth. The general secretary David Evans assured us that all complaints about trigger ballots and selections were fully investigated, and he was disappointed at criticisms which impugned the professionalism, integrity and impartiality of party staff.

The committee also agreed reselection procedures (trigger ballots) for combined authority metro mayors and police and crime commissioners up for election between 2024 and 2026.

Patience Rewarded

Back in 2021 conference agreed that CLPs must gain permission from the NEC before affiliating to external organisation. Ever since then Tunbridge Wells had been waiting for a response to their request to affiliate to the Labour Campaign for Council Housing, and more recently to the Labour Housing Group. The official view was that CLPs should spend their limited funds on electing Labour councillors and MPs, and seek other ways to engage with organisations which share our values. However the committee approved both requests, and also agreed to establish a national list of approved organisations and to delegate future decisions to regional directors. This is welcome and will save everyone's time including mine.

The committee agreed the allocation of NEC members to the six national policy forum (NPF) policy commissions, and I am continuing on the safe and secure communities commission. The NEC will be represented on the joint policy committee (JPC) by the six NEC co-convenors, four from the trade union section, one MP and one socialist societies representative, and myself as an additional representative.

Resolutions referred from conference included a thoughtful motion from City of Chester on access to events for disabled members, and a motion from South West Surrey calling on the NPF to consult members on electoral reform in the next cycle of policy documents. These were noted together with other motions, including Oxford's call for the party leadership to re-think their position of instructing shadow ministers not to join picket lines.

In response to questions we were told that arrangements for the national Young Labour conference would be discussed at the awayday at the end of November, along with the disabled members' conference and the women's conference, which now seems unlikely to be held in March 2023 as envisaged.

Finally I have been promised the full results of the NEC elections held in the summer, with numbers of ballots issued and returned and the round-by-round breakdown of voting, as provided to the party by Civica Election Services. These have always previously been available on request.

Complaints and Disciplinary Sub-Committee (aka Disputes Panel), 8 November 2022

The committee received the latest figures for complaints, membership appeals, investigations, exclusions and hearings by the national constitutional committee (NCC) and the independent complaints board (ICB). Numbers of suspensions were not available because data are in the process of being transferred to the new membership system, now expected to be operational from January 2023.

The complaints team reported that the backlog was virtually cleared and they were now able to manage incoming complaints efficiently. Valid complaints were assessed according to standard priorities including whether protected characteristics are involved, their seriousness and the impact on members and the party. Those likely to lead at most to a recommendation of no further action were not followed up, allowing investigators to devote more time to complex allegations.

Antisemitism still accounted for a majority of valid complaints, though importantly the proportion judged as high priority was the same as for other protected characteristics. All members agreed that racism and Islamophobia were currently under-reported, but the remedy is to call out unacceptable behaviour wherever it occurs, and then hold the party to its commitment to treat all forms of prejudice and discrimination equally. I have just attended the party's training session on awareness of Islamophobia, and was struck by how closely the dynamics resemble those underlying antisemitism.

Moving to disciplinary reports, of cases determined by NEC panels since April 2022 the independent review board rejected three of the 90 decisions but confirmed the others, suggesting that the IRB was not a rubber-stamp but also that most NEC decisions were justifiable. Progress through NEC panels seemed to be moving faster but there were still 65 members awaiting an NCC hearing, some for more than a year.

More Questions

Concerns were raised from all sides about possible suspension for factional reasons, for instance on the eve of selection meetings. The committee was assured that affected members could request a rapid review, so that no-one would miss out on opportunities. I asked about delegates prevented from attending conference, and was told that eleven delegates were expelled or suspended shortly before conference opened. Seven were from CLPs which had additional delegates and the other four CLPs were offered the opportunity to upgrade visitors to delegate status, so very few CLPs were actually disenfranchised.

I continue to be disturbed that of 362 members reported in the last year for supporting another organisation, more than 90% of the allegations were upheld. Some instances of "support" seem flimsy and unlike other disciplinary procedures, where penalties range from a reminder of values through a formal warning to expulsion, these are binary decisions: the member is either cleared or expelled. So far I have not served on any exclusion panels, but I learned that there is in fact a third way: the panel may decide to reinstate the member and impose a period of suspension as an intermediate penalty. So it is worth appealing.

Summaries of disciplinary outcomes are published on the party website, at the foot of the page

<https://labour.org.uk/complaints/>

with the latest report from July 2022 at

<https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/202207-Disciplinary-Report.pdf>

National Policy Forum, 25 October 2022

This was a brief business meeting following the election of new NPF representatives over the summer. The policy development team outlined the processes leading up to the final-stage NPF meeting in July 2023, and Anneliese Dodds, chair of the Stronger Together policy review, spoke about the challenges ahead. Like Liz Truss the latest prime minister Rishi Sunak had no mandate, and was just continuing 12 years of Tory failure. We split into group discussions, one for each of the six policy commissions, before returning to elect NPF officers for the coming year.

I had held the position of NPF chair from February 2018, including two years' absence from the NEC when the chair was left vacant, reflecting its lack of relevance. Returning the NPF to its former status needed a leader with the authority to negotiate between the shadow cabinet, the unions, councillors and other stakeholders, and I was delighted to support my friend and local MP Anneliese Dodds as chair. Mick Whelan and Angela Eagle MP were similarly unopposed as vice-chairs from the affiliates and the elected representatives sections respectively, and after a ballot Naushabah Khan joined them as the CLP vice-chair, with 78 votes to 23 for Dylan Lewis-Rowlands.

Joint Policy Committee, 15 November 2022

This was the first meeting of the newly-constituted JPC, called to agree the schedule through to the next manifesto. Keir Starmer stressed the importance of this work. With a general election less than two years away Labour had to set out a clear alternative vision. As leader his tasks had been first, to change the party, and second, to expose the Tories as unfit for government. With five prime ministers in six years, four chancellors in four months and twelve years of collective failure, people were angry at being let down. Now we must address the question "If not them, then why us?". If we only attracted those who supported us in 2015, 2017 or 2019 we would lose again, so we needed to persuade our lost voters to return.

Asked about Labour's response to the autumn statement, Keir Starmer said we could not let the Tories off the hook by claiming that all the problems were down to Covid and Ukraine. There were other choices. I conveyed views from UNISON's retired members conference, where delegates felt excluded by constant repetition of "the party for working people". Pensioners matter too, and they vote in large numbers.

Members also raised the need to protect public services in Scotland against the SNP government's freedom to spend UK government grants as they wished, and suggested emphasising policies which didn't cost billions, such as green initiatives, public health and devolution. Keir Starmer agreed on the need to push resources and power away from the centre. Overheating in the south-east and hoping prosperity would spread was the wrong approach, and devolution was as important to growth as to the constitution.

Road to the Manifesto

The meeting then agreed the following programme:

January – March 2023

Draft papers will be published in January 2023, with eight weeks for consultation. These will be based around themes decided by the six policy commissions. Submissions will be accepted from CLPs, branches, affiliates and external organisations such as charities but not, at this stage, from individuals, and at least one event for members will be organised by each commission. Local parties should set aside some time in February to discuss and respond to these documents.

March 2023

Commissions will draw up policy documents based on this input and all work done since the 2019 election.

April 2023

These documents will be circulated to all party members and affiliates. NPF representatives will be able to submit up to (probably) six amendments by a date in May, under detailed procedures to be agreed at a future meeting. Staff will work through these and make recommendations as to which amendments should be accepted and which require further consideration, producing a draft policy platform.

21 – 23 July 2023

The 200-strong NPF will meet and try to reach consensus on all areas, with votes on any remaining differences in the final session. However precedent suggests that no alternative positions will succeed, as negotiations will lead to trade-offs across the board followed by overwhelming endorsement.

October 2023

Annual conference will vote on the policy platform put forward by the NPF. If carried by a two-thirds majority it will go forward to the Clause V meeting which signs off the manifesto after the general election is called.

Some members felt that eight weeks was too short, though if local parties know that documents are coming, they can plan ahead. The committee agreed to add *Stronger Together* to the work in progress, though CLPs have never been formally consulted, as well as Gordon Brown's constitutional review, David Blunkett's learning and skills report, and the start-up review (no, I don't know what this is either). Others asked what would happen if the election was not held until 2024, a situation which we faced after the 2008 NPF meeting. Then, the broad themes remained, but were updated to reflect subsequent developments.

I was concerned that some commission papers have been narrowly focused, and omitted key areas entirely. For instance safe and secure communities has never consulted on migration and asylum, nor on constitutional issues. I have suggested that we consider Gordon Brown's proposals as well as members' overwhelming support for proportional representation expressed at the 2021 and 2022 conferences. Local parties can send views on subjects which are not included in the documents, but it diminishes the role of conference if its decisions are sidelined. And on a practical note I asked for CLP representatives to be enabled to communicate with local parties, so they can consult the members who elected them. This will be particularly important next spring, in considering what amendments they should submit.

Finally Angela Eagle stressed the importance of building goodwill and trust through the months ahead, rather than leaving it all to the final showdown. Angela knows more about this than anyone, having chaired the NPF through to 2014 in the most consensual process since it was established. This time we can hopefully agree a manifesto which both unites the party and excites and attracts the country.

As usual please feel free to circulate and/or post online, and contact me at annblack50@btinternet.com / 07956-637958. Previous reports are at www.annblack.co.uk