

NEC Update, January 2025

Before the next full NEC meeting on Tuesday 28 January, here is a round-up of recent activities – as always, comments and questions are welcome.

National Policy Forum, 22 January 2025

The NPF met for the first time since July 2023. Ellie Reeves MP was elected as chair, with vice-chairs Nathan Oswin (CLP section), Mick Whelan (affiliates) and Mark Ferguson MP (elected representatives).

Ellie promised a dynamic and inclusive process, reflecting the breadth of the labour movement. Keir Starmer thanked us for committing time and energy, and said that our work would benefit the party and the country. On entering government everything was even worse than expected, and we truly needed a decade of national renewal. The UK was already among the leading economies, but the results of growth had to be felt in people's pockets, not just shown as lines on graphs. It was shocking that parental income was still the leading determinant of children's success, rather than their own talents and efforts. Some hard choices had been made, but the priorities were to rescue the NHS, control our own energy supply and keep people safe in their streets and homes. General secretary Hollie Ridley emphasised the key role of the NPF in building a winning general election manifesto for 2029.

The NPF framework is summarised at <https://labour.org.uk/updates/members-updates/what-is-the-national-policy-forum/>. Papers on specific topics will be published for consultation in each of the first three years, and drawn together in the fourth year before a final NPF meeting in 2028. These papers are not intended to restrict discussion, and members are free to comment on whatever matters most to them. The website is being redeveloped and until it is available all motions, ideas and feedback should be sent to policyforum@labour.org.uk, from where they can be directed to the appropriate policy commission.

Every NPF member is allocated to one of six commissions, each linked to one of Labour's six missions. They vary considerably in scope, and shadow between one and five government departments, covering:

Build an NHS fit for the future – NHS, public health, mental health, social care

Make Britain a clean energy superpower – climate and net zero, energy, environment, food, rural affairs

Take back our streets – police and crime, criminal justice, courts, probation, civil rights, border security

Britain reconnected – national security, defence, foreign affairs, international development, procurement, constitutional affairs, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Kickstart economic growth – economic security, employment rights, future of work, business, industrial strategy, science, digital and technology, transport, planning and housebuilding, local government, retail / high streets, trade

Break down barriers to opportunity – social security, pensions, childcare, early years, women and equalities, culture, media, sport, online safety, schools, colleges, universities, skills and vocational education, youth services, and secure housing

I joined the last of these. It will be difficult to give full attention to child and pensioner poverty, housing, education, supporting disabled people, university funding and all the other areas, but we will do our best.

For the last session we split into our respective commissions. The co-convenor Bridget Phillipson highlighted work already in hand: breakfast clubs, requiring all teachers to be qualified, increasing the proportion of 5-year-olds who are school-ready, investing in schools, and fixing social care for children. She and Liz Kendall, secretary for work and pensions, were jointly chairing a taskforce on child poverty.

Commission members introduced themselves, and they bring enthusiasm and a wide range of professional and lived experience. Welsh representatives asked how devolved areas such as education would be handled. With Senedd elections in 2026 Labour has to be consistent across all levels of government.

The joint policy committee, which steers the NPF, would meet soon to finalise the workplan for 2025. The NEC is represented on the JPC by the NEC co-convenor Gavin Sibthorpe, the six NEC commission co-convenors and myself as an additional NEC representative, the only one from the constituency section.

Complaints and Disciplinary Sub-Committee, 14 January 2025

The need for the NPF was highlighted by the report on complaints. In the last quarter of 2024 only 33, just 2.3% of those submitted, were assessed as valid. Of the others 27% related to policy or strategy and 31% to complaints about an MP, some of which were also policy-related. Along with another 23% considered trivial, vexatious or not a matter for the complaints team, staff were becoming overwhelmed and unable to deal with genuine complaints. The web page now has a space to enter anything relating to government policies or ministers acting in their official role: the contents may be passed on but will not be investigated.

An obvious alternative is to send all views on policies, whether positive or less so, to the NPF, using the address policyforum@labour.org.uk until the web page returns. The NPF and its policy commissions are responsible for maintaining communications between government, members and voters, and need as much input as possible. Please keep submissions courteous at all times, even when these are critical.

Within the 33 genuine complaints support for another party was the largest single category, but numbers were too low to draw robust inferences. The team also gave updates on sexual harassment cases, with feedback on procedures informing a review later this year. Training on safeguarding was being rolled out to regional offices, and should become embedded in party culture.

Disciplinary Cases

Summary statistics and outcomes are at <https://labour.org.uk/resources/complaints/> including the report from this meeting. During 2024 NEC disciplinary panels heard 138 cases. Of these one-third were expelled, suspended or referred to the NCC (national constitutional committee) or the ICB (independent complaints board), one-third received a formal warning or a reminder of conduct, and one-third a reminder of values or no further action. For exclusion panels 90% of allegations were upheld, with most expelled. The majority involved supporting a proscribed organisation or a candidate standing against Labour.

Of 105 members currently suspended, 19 had been suspended for more than 18 months. Some delays are caused by police or other external investigations, but not all. The ambition is to reduce this to zero and then lower waiting times further, but I apologise again to members who are still in the queue. The committee expressed concerns about their welfare, and were told that the team aimed to contact all parties every month, to reassure them that they were not forgotten.

Organisation Committee, 14 January 2025

Members recorded a vote of thanks to Wendy Nichols, who is leaving the NEC after 14 years to serve as a Labour peer. She was elected as NEC vice-chair in 2018 (by 18 votes to 17) and then NEC chair, leading the party through turbulent times. Since 2021 she has chaired the organisation committee. Joanne Thomas of USDAW was elected to succeed her, with Maggi Ferncombe of UNISON as vice-chair.

An update for the May local elections showed that most target seats now have candidates. Equalities monitoring statistics were not available because applicants do not have to provide the data, but the requirement for trade union membership should be enforced. Now that some regions have taken over panel interviews from local government committees I asked for assurances that they have the capacity to get through these in a timely fashion. There were also questions about whether all the elections will go ahead, as councils with a clear path towards combined authority mayors and unitary structures can ask for postponement. While Labour supports devolution of power down from Westminster to local communities as a principle, there will be political, financial and organisational consequences.

The committee received an update on the work of campaign improvement boards (CIBs), intended to support Labour groups which are facing challenges and to prepare them for upcoming elections. A paper on CLPs in special measures would go to the full NEC, with the political will and resources to find a way forward.

Finally I asked for updated guidance on hybrid meetings at local level, including secret ballots for electing officers. The last note was issued several years ago. I can't find it on the website, nor any reference to Anonymvoter, the party's approved software for online ballots. The conference timetable had been circulated to CLPs, and secretaries should note that the deadline for motions is Thursday 11 September, not Thursday 18 September which was in the first mailing.

The December meeting was an informal awayday, with welcomes from general secretary Hollie Ridley and Keir Starmer's political director Claire Reynolds. Hollie spoke of empowering women at every level, and Claire led a frank discussion on achievements and challenges. She recognised the need to explain hard choices such as charging inheritance tax on richer farms, raising employers' national insurance and cutting winter fuel payments. People had to feel the positive difference that a Labour government makes.

We then split into groups and discussed policy development, campaigning, training for women's officers, women's branches, encouraging and supporting women as councillors, and national women's conference. These should provide the basis for a workplan which will evolve through the year.

Finally Bridget Phillipson MP, secretary of state for women and equalities, stressed the need to break down barriers to opportunity, working across government departments. Poorer children get lower grades, and the gender pay gap persists. Labour aims to reduce violence against women and girls, tackle prejudice and discrimination in all their forms, extend childcare, make work pay, expand employment rights and challenge unacceptable behaviour online and in person.

Following Up

The January meeting began by sending solidarity to Jess Phillips MP and Cllr Arooj Shah, both recipients of appalling online and offline abuse. The workplan is being formulated and there was some debate about priorities and the strategic role of the committee. I was keen to find out if there will be space for visitors at this year's women's conference, and others stressed the need for a balance between policymaking and networking. The committee agreed to produce a quarterly newsletter, including news on what the government is delivering for women, and women's place within Labour's democratic structures.

Party chair Ellie Reeves joined us and ran through work on raising living standards, building 1.5 million new homes and giving children the best start in life, all in the face of the Tory £22 billion black hole. On violence against women and girls Labour was strengthening domestic abuse protection orders against physical threats, coercive control and stalking, and introducing legal advocacy for victims of rape, laws on spiking, and preventive measures including guidance for teachers and tackling misogyny. Labour would make work pay for millions of low-paid women in insecure jobs, grant employment rights from day one, and extend access to childcare. In six months Labour had delivered more than the Tories did in 14 years, but one term was not enough. She hoped the national policy forum would create a winning platform for the next election.

As always I asked for our achievements to be promoted to the wider membership. Briefings from ministers are useful, though would be better if they took questions, but only 1,000 members join the calls, so 99.7% continue to rely on social and mainstream media and chatter. One-third do not have a Labour MP, and most never attend a meeting or join a campaign weekend. If we can ask them for money every week, then we can also send them snappy messages to share with family, friends and workmates. These "inactive" members will be closer to normal people than us activists, and are an under-used asset. In October 65% of voters, asked for the best thing that Labour had done in their first hundred days, said "nothing yet" / "don't know". Winter fuel payment changes were the standout negative, though that was before the budget. All our 300,000+ members need regular rebuttals, explanations and positive soundbites to counter media bias.

Moving Forwards

The committee agreed to hold online sessions for women as part of the national policy forum consultation, and a toolkit for running events would be provided to women's officers and branches. Every policy area should be gender-proofed, and links with the Welsh and Scottish forums should be clarified.

The meeting then heard from Charlotte Walker, director of nations and regions, and Cllr Sarah Feeney, leader of Warwickshire county Labour group, about attracting and retaining women councillors. Members were concerned about the number of women who only serve for one term. Barriers include today's hostile political atmosphere; younger councillors in rented accommodation and insecure employment having to move frequently; and the demands of the role itself, with increasing amounts of casework, non-stop campaigning, and council schedules apparently designed for retired people without caring commitments. Informal support networks could be helpful, but more research was needed into reasons for leaving and ways of preventing burnout.

Equalities Committee, 21 January 2025

Abdi Duale was re-elected as chair, along with vice-chairs for women (Ann Black), BAME members (Carol Sewell), LGBT+ members (Anu Prashar), disabled members (Ellen Morrison) and youth (Elsie Greenwood).

Cllr Ergin Erbil, leader of Enfield council, spoke of his personal journey to leadership and the obstacles facing BAME members pursuing a political career. These included party structures, factionalism and assuming that all members of an ethnic minority group shared the same views. He had benefited from mentoring and called for greater transparency, more training and guidance, party participation in cultural celebrations, engaging with community groups, ethnic minority representation on selection panels, and a zero tolerance approach to prejudice and discrimination, as with anti-semitism. BAME votes could not be taken for granted.

The committee agreed that sharing best practice was essential. We were also informed that the Bernie Grant leadership programme had attracted more than 330 applicants, and 27 were selected after shortlisting and interviews.

Stakeholder Reports

The Labour Muslim Network had produced its guide to Ramadan for local parties, and were planning a leadership training programme. The Jewish Labour Movement had held a Hanukkah party and a one-day conference for 400 people. Disability Labour were focusing political activity around the assisted dying bill, aiming for comradely discussion even where opinions differed, and also protecting disabled people against perceived threats to their livelihood. After winter fuel payments were withdrawn from many pensioners, including some on very low incomes, it was feared that benefits for disabled people would be targeted to save money rather than designed for genuine support.

Finally it was noted that the NEC agreed the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Association) definition of anti-Gypsyism / anti-Roma discrimination in 2022, and this would be added to other codes of conduct. Discussion of codes on homophobia and transphobia was continuing with relevant stakeholders.

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