

National Executive Committee Meeting, 20 January 2026

Vice-chair Peter Wheeler, deputising for Shabana Mahmood, welcomed members to the meeting. Aimy Saunders of UNISON replaces Maggi Ferncombe, and Mick Whelan of ASLEF has retired. To establish the line of succession for NEC vice-chair and chair the length of service for all members would be circulated, and Ian Murray of the FBU would be next in line. Tributes were paid to Patrick Duffy, Colin Pickthall and George Catchpole. The NEC also thanked Carol Linforth for 47 years of party service, from clerk/typist to conference supremo, and now representing Labour in the Lords. Her ability to work with twelve leaders and four prime ministers, regardless of fashion and faction, reflects her total professionalism throughout.

General secretary Hollie Ridley said the party was focused on winning as many seats as possible on 7 May at every level, through raising funds, controlling expenditure and working with colleagues in local government and the unions. She highlighted technical developments including the ability to upload marked registers, new canvassing scripts, localised statistics, a continuing recruitment drive and promotion of postal votes, which must now be renewed every three years. Detailed approaches to our various opponents would be presented at the next meeting.

Feedback suggested that potholes, bins and dog poo were at the top of local concerns, but voters were also influenced by national policies. Members asked for clear signposts to government achievements, for activists to highlight on the doorstep. Lessons should be learned from Labour's recent win in Yorkshire, defending a council seat comfortably against both Reform and the Greens.

National Policy Forum Update

Ellie Reeves, chair of the NPF, reported that the joint policy committee had agreed a workplan for this year's consultation on the theme of national renewal. Dates were being finalised, with briefings for policy officers in February and documents published in March for discussion through to June. As this overlaps the campaign period, local parties should plan ahead in anticipation. The website was being updated and she hoped it would enable CLPs to connect with their regional representatives.

Deputy Leader's Report

Lucy Powell was developing her role as political deputy leader, working with MPs and members on building relationships between party and government. Many attended her Lucy Listens webinar, and 6,500 had already completed her survey. She would analyse the responses and report back. She stressed that members needed to feel valued as part of the party's decision-making processes, with more rights than basic supporters. She attended several events a week, and had welcomed the unions to a reception at 10 Downing Street to celebrate the employment rights act. Labour had a strong story to tell, taking on energy companies, bad landlords, bad employers and other vested interests, and tackling the cost of living crisis, and members got annoyed by anonymous briefings from those who wanted us to fail.

Members asked for effective communications on the dangers of Reform in government, especially in Wales where Labour could end up with fewer members in a larger Senedd. Lucy agreed that we could not, and should not try, to out-Reform Reform, though any government had to control the country's borders, and we should explain what we are doing to change people's lives. We all need to defend scrapping the two-child benefit limit, which punished innocent children for the actions of their parents. In an age of increasing voter volatility the only certainty is more uncertainty, but our values must stay constant even if their expression changes. (Or, as John Prescott used to put it, traditional values in a modern setting.) Everyone is affected by the cost of living and an economy which doesn't work for them, and most will benefit from rises in the minimum wage and frozen rail fares. She was speaking with ministers about the Birmingham bin strike, and keen to engage with Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities on their specific concerns.

Prime Minister's Questions

Keir Starmer emphasised that 2026 would be a pivotal year. Last year saw many announcements, but change takes time to reach voters on the ground. They should soon see and appreciate new employment rights including sick pay, parental and bereavement leave; NHS waiting lists already down by 86,000; wages rising faster than prices; six interest rate cuts leading to cheaper mortgages; £150 off energy bills; homicide rates falling in London under Sadiq Khan as mayor; positive news about the future of Northern Powerhouse Rail; lifting half a million children out of poverty; and taking on Elon Musk and grok. Laws controlling social media needed to be enforced more effectively. The government was keen to learn from Australia's ban on social media for under-16s and was consulting on what path the UK should take.

Internationally Keir said the Gaza ceasefire was holding, but it was essential to get more aid into the territory and to move to phase 2 of the process. Ukraine was paying a heavy price for Russian attacks on basic services, leaving cities with no water or heating in temperatures 20 degrees below zero. On Greenland he had confirmed the UK's commitment to territorial integrity and sovereignty, and it was wrong for the United States to impose punitive tariffs against allies. He would continue to co-ordinate with our European allies, holding to core principles but aiming to avoid being dragged into trade wars and to ensure that NATO survived. International and domestic issues were linked, with energy costs doubling due to the war in Ukraine, but he was keen to put the cost of living at the front and centre of every conversation.

Keir then responded fluently to a range of questions and comments. He agreed with MPs that against the terrifying international situation this was not the time to feed internal tittle-tattle, and the cabinet were all frustrated by distractions. Talks with European allies continued around closer co-ordination on energy, emissions, cyber, young people including Erasmus, and defence strategies. Linking into a customs union was more difficult because it would over-ride trade deals now agreed with countries outside the bloc. The defence investment plan, expected in March, was making progress. He understood trade union concerns about possibly building nuclear vessels overseas and agreed that we should do as much as other countries to safeguard jobs and skills. Keeping jobs in the UK means that taxes are paid into our economy.

He sympathised with Birmingham women workers still waiting for equal pay claims to be settled, with 10,000 outstanding for up to 20 years. The tribunal process took too long, and it would be better if unions were involved in the workplace from the beginning. On digital ID, the main advantages would be easier access to public services and a portal into benefits to ensure that people didn't lose out on entitlements; the compulsory element seems to have gone. He was still personally committed to the Hillsborough law but had to keep the country secure. Sometimes MI6 had to use covert means to save lives in hostile countries, and that must be reconciled with accountability for those whose sense of justice had been destroyed by institutional lies. He was continuing to talk with the families to reach an acceptable resolution.

Finally he criticised the Greens for calling for the UK to leave NATO and abandon our independent(?) nuclear deterrent, and wanting to lock up landlords while allowing dealers to sell heroin outside school playgrounds. They were not a serious party.

Housing, Communities and Local Government

We were then joined by secretary of state Steve Reed, who ran through his portfolio. Housing starts were up by 18% and he sounded confident about meeting the target of 1.5 million new homes in this parliament. The need was clear: rough sleeping has doubled and temporary accommodation is anything but temporary. Labour aims to provide more social and affordable housing, protect tenants and tackle leasehold abuses. Not everyone likes it, but his **Build Baby Build** slogan is designed to grab attention in the social media age. Members highlighted leasehold problems and warned that increasing help-to-buy provision would inflate land values.

The fair funding review of local government was intended to match financial support with deprivation, and he was working with the department of education and the treasury to tackle profiteering in SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) spending, which has quintupled in recent years. Devolution was moving at pace, expanding the mayoral model and replacing two-tier local councils with unitary authorities. He had deferred four mayoral elections pending reorganisation, and asked other leaders if they wanted to delay this year's elections to bodies that might not exist in 2028. The Pride in Place programme saw £5 billion shared between 250 areas to support local initiatives, and councils have new powers to close vape shops, barbers and bookies.

Councillors raised growing fears for their personal safety including online and in-person abuse, cars set on fire and demonstrations outside their homes, and Steve agreed that they deserved the same support provided to MPs. UNISON were concerned about pay for local government staff facing reorganisation, and Steve said that pensions would follow them to new councils: savings would come from better integration of services, not job losses. He was also keen to see the bin strike resolved. He could not interfere directly but was urging all sides to find a way forward.

I asked that Labour should claim credit for Pride in Place projects, something we never managed to do for European Union initiatives, and passed on concerns from council leaders who were asked to choose whether to hold elections and then leant on behind the scenes. Where there is no overall control opponents can complain loudly and freely about denial of democracy, and one Labour leader – in Nuneaton & Bedworth – has already lost a vote of no confidence. Steve replied that these decisions should not be imposed from above, and local leaders know best if they can deliver huge and complex organisational changes and also run elections. Steve added that party structures did not reflect the new devolved structures and the NEC should look at adapting the rules to support accountability.

Finally the coming elections bill will bring votes at 16 and automatic voter registration, and ban donations from crypto and shell companies. Some wanted the government to be more ambitious, given that the Tories introduced 21 measures through primary legislation and countless secondary changes to electoral systems, mostly to their own advantage. But automatic registration could be a real game-changer, and if introduced by December 2028, when the next boundary review starts, the resulting constituencies may reflect more accurately the number of people who actually live there.

Scotland

We then moved on to three presentations. First, Scotland with leader Anas Sarwar, deputy Jackie Baillie, party chair Anna Turley and Scottish staff, who spoke about practical preparations. There is a path to victory by focusing on the Holyrood parliament rather than a referendum on Westminster, while not overlooking achievements by UK Labour. The SNP record is poor: A&E departments are the worst on record, and 800,000 people are waiting more than two years for NHS attention, compared with fewer than 200 in England with a much larger population, and the Scottish economy is sluggish. The SNP are refusing to build small modular reactors on the nuclear sites at Torness and Hunterston for ideological reasons, and independence is not at the top of most voters' concerns. Anas spoke with passion and conviction, and if Scottish Labour does not succeed it will not be for want of energy and commitment.

Trade Unions

Second, voters trust their trade unions more than they trust politicians, and the party is co-ordinating pilot projects with various unions to give them ammunition, including facts about the new employment rights. The NEC was warned not to take union members for granted, and MPs were asked to meet and listen to representatives whenever they tour workplaces. Flying visits, with ministers making announcements for the cameras against an industrial backdrop and then whizzing off again, are not well received.

Youth and Student Work

Finally, an update on building a thriving youth movement. Following a successful conference in Cardiff last year, there were plans for an International Women's Day event for young people, a youth day at annual conference, material for freshers' fairs and travel funds to support campaign days. Overall the vibes are much better than ten years ago, with a more welcoming and less factional movement.

Messages were designed to amplify Labour's achievements and promise that those who work hard will get on in life, and counter the Greens, who capitalise on grievance. Estimates are that 82% of 16 to 24-year-olds use social media as their primary source of news and content creators are being trained to use Reddit and YouTube, while experiences in Scotland and Wales would help to prepare for UK-wide votes at 16. Feedback on what opposition parties are doing was always welcome.

The meeting then closed and members departed, blissfully unaware of the Gorton & Denton by-election bombshell shortly to be detonated ...

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