

National Executive Committee Meeting, 19 May 2026

The chair Shabana Mahmood led tributes to former MPs Phil Woolas and Tony Worthington and to Jeremy Beecham, Newcastle councillor for 55 years and chair of the NEC in 2005/2006. I remember Jeremy with affection as always fair, independent and non-factional.

The meeting focused on the May elections and on what comes next. NEC members, led by Keir Starmer, shared appreciation of the work of Labour councillors over many years and sadness at the loss of comrades and friends. Keir acknowledged that voters were frustrated and did not yet feel the promised change. In fact the government had already delivered huge improvements on employment rights, child poverty and NHS waiting lists, growth was up despite challenges in the Middle East, and nationalising British Steel showed that Labour was getting things done. The current turbulence was a distraction from all the positive stories, and the movement must unite and win the Makerfield by-election. It was a straight fight with Reform, and whoever was the candidate he would support them 100%. As he left the meeting Shabana announced that Andy Burnham had been chosen by an NEC panel.

On leadership issues my feedback was mixed, but most agreed that recent days had not shown the party at its best. NEC members reinforced this and raised various topics including job losses at Network Rail, nationalising the grid to underpin energy security, banning so-called conversion therapy and the plight of Jagtar Singh Johal, unjustly imprisoned in India. The prime minister reassured union representatives that well-paid jobs in oil and gas would continue for many years, alongside progress towards energy independence. Only a tiny proportion of UK supplies come through the strait of Hormuz, but we are tied to world prices and domestic bills are affected by other people's wars. On the much-anticipated defence investment plan it was important to get it right, so that jobs are created in the UK rather than going abroad.

Labour is operating in a hostile media climate and Keir contrasted wall-to-wall attacks on Angela Rayner, who was actually cleared of wrongdoing, with silence around Nigel Farage's £5 million reward for Brexit, his lobbying for crypto-currency, and how he paid for his multiple houses. Asked how he would restore integrity when too many think that all parties are corrupt, he said that he had strengthened the ministerial code and the role of the independent adviser.

I asked Keir to support the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections in their initiative on electoral reform. Two years ago Labour won two-thirds of the seats on one-third of the votes. The possibility of Reform reversing that in 2029 is all too real, and if it happened we would not be forgiven. He agreed on the need to keep Reform out, but changing the voting structure in Wales had not led to better results. However references to the broken state of the current system bubbled up through the meeting, and since then I've noticed moves to restore more proportional preferential voting in mayoral elections before 18 June.

Deputy Leader's Report

Lucy Powell praised party staff for their tireless efforts, many working without a break since Christmas. She shared the collective disappointment and the heartbreak felt by councillors and colleagues, and argued for clear messages and a strong story. A full analysis would be conducted. In 2024 Labour benefited from splits on the right, but the landscape has shifted and Reform is now gaining from fragmentation on the "progressive" side. The old two-party system was smashed. In a four-way contest 30% of the vote was enough to win, and some councillors were elected on less than 20%. She thanked ASLEF and the FBU for staying with Labour, and she was working with the unions on rolling out new employment rights. It was time for everyone to unite, repair the damage and disagree, where necessary, in private. She invited everyone to come to Makerfield and help to elect Andy Burnham.

NEC members urged Labour to shout about our achievements and bring forward big, bold, radical policies. Alternative leadership candidates were urged to build on the government's record, rather than reject it wholesale and repeat the mistakes of 2010 and 2015. Going forward, Lucy highlighted the reset in relations with Europe and the forthcoming Hillsborough law. Members also asked for equalities analyses of the local results, with one Labour group falling from 43% to 12% women councillors.

Councillors found it hard on the frontline when central funding had been halved and there was no respite for many, with multiple by-elections where new councillors had already departed and more elections in 2027 where councils elect in thirds and in new unitaries after local government reorganisation. Others reported diminished motivation among activists blocked from campaigning in their non-target general election seats.

Younger members tell me that our social media operations need improvement. Many voters now get all their “news” from the internet, which is rife with misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories. Safeguarding for candidates and councillors, online and offline, was increasingly urgent.

General Secretary’s Report

Hollie Ridley gave her perspective on an exceptionally complex set of contests, with staffing at “business as usual” rather than higher general election levels. They were fully stretched, and she aimed to empower councillors and MPs so they could run their affairs without party staff if necessary. I believe that devolving more decisions would be welcomed by CLPs and local government committees. She said that every region and nation was different, and the days of straight fights with the Tories were gone. Next up was the Makerfield by-election and Westminster by-elections in Aberdeen South and Arbroath & Broughty Ferry where MPs stood down on election to the Scottish parliament. More security was needed for candidates and staff facing unpleasant and frightening attacks, and we could not simply accept these as a fact of life. Finally Hollie looked forward to conference, with a new, more efficient and secure events system and exhibition sales under way, and stressed the importance of financial stability and a balanced budget.

The NEC thanked Hollie and all the staff. Members raised the need for positive messages rather than just “don’t vote Green / Reform”; tackling Reform before their behaviour gets normalised; supporting the Scottish and Welsh executives; learning from campaigns that did well; refining twinning arrangements; acknowledging disparity between healthy CLPs and those which struggle; whether some Campaign Improvement Boards (CIBs) have negative effects; financial support for young members travelling to by-elections; the value of mobilisation assistants; technical problems with Labour One; stronger digital communications; and the need to get postal votes renewed every three years. Closing the discussion the chair Shabana said that the voter ID script was not picking up the current volatility, and traditional methods must be challenged when they do not work.

Hollie noted all points. The plan was to direct resources to where they would make most difference but we were fighting on unfamiliar ground, with the Greens using “Change” against us, though most people still do not want to be represented by Reform. All MPs would be encouraged to develop their online presence. Lucy Powell would lead the reviews, while respecting the powers devolved to Scottish and Welsh Labour.

Balancing the Books

The treasurer Mike Payne gave a presentation on finances and reiterated the importance of a balanced budget, even when faced with unexpected external and internal elections. He was confident that the party would continue to live within its means and again achieve a successful audit, and the NEC thanked the finance team for their unstinting work. Mike will be much missed when he stands down in September. The NEC noted that losing councillors has financial implications for local parties as well as for national funds.

The Final Stretch

The last session heard lengthy presentations on the organisation and results of the English, Scottish and Welsh campaigns. Some of this may be confidential, but in any case I could not read the slides or write fast enough. Lessons from recent by-elections were used to inform digital campaigning, alongside tailored scripts, bespoke messaging and personalised mails. The “air war” focused on the NHS, the cost of living and Pride in Place. On polling day alone 400,000 contacts were made, but all-year-round campaigning also underpinned success and I was pleased with a shout-out for Oxford, still a Reform-free (and Tory-free) council run by Labour, albeit as a minority administration.

Our campaign messages were that Reform are extreme, divisive and not on people’s side, and Richard Tice’s tax affairs and Nigel Farage’s multi-million pound gifts raised serious questions. Where the Greens controlled councils they did not deliver, they often opposed building homes, and some of their candidates had dodgy records. Labour would hold other parties to account, comparing their promises with their record.

Labour’s YouTube broadcast, repeating statements from Reform representatives, was viewed 25 million times and was intended to be uncomfortable. I feel grubby watching it and am reminded of 2023 when I was told I was being squeamish over the Rishi Sunak child abuse attacks. But even in hard electoral terms did it increase Labour’s vote, or damage Reform, or drive people away altogether because we are all disgusting? And of the millions of leaflets, direct mails, contacts and social media posts which were the most effective? Limited resources must be spent on what is proven to work, and that needs evidence.

National Updates

In Wales key factors were low trust in politics, anti-incumbency in Wales and in London, the cost of living, public services, the NHS, potholes, Gaza and above all Plaid Cymru's line that this was a two-horse race with Reform. Voters needed to feel real change. Plaid have now defeated Labour under first past the post in Caerphilly and under the new closed list system for the Senedd. The large constituencies were difficult terrain, especially rural areas, and Welsh Labour faced political and organisational challenges. Their review would be externally led, and some NEC members suggested that this should apply to all reviews.

After the general election I suggested that ruthless targeting would encourage tactical voting in England as well and that may have contributed to losses in Witney and other areas where members were not allowed to campaign at all in 2024. Labour is no longer the only anti-Reform and anti-Tory option. With a high level of Don't Knows, squeeze messaging is difficult: which voters are we trying to squeeze and how?

In Scotland Labour's vote share fell by only 2%, compared with 20% in England and 25% in Wales, but results were nevertheless disappointing. Anas Sarwar would have been by far the best first minister. The SNP managed to frame the election as a referendum on the UK government and on Keir Starmer, using the winter fuel allowance and Peter Mandelson to distract attention from their indifferent record at Holyrood.

In a final round members suggested that anti-drug messaging did not work against the Greens in every area, and Reform councils would blame lack of central government funding for failure to deliver locally. They also mentioned the effectiveness of rival ground campaigns and Nigel Farage's Trump-like immunity to accusations which would be fatal to any normal politician. And our arguments may be too sophisticated: I understand the idea of telling voters that the Greens cannot run councils elsewhere, but this is how a London member reacted:

"London Region put out a letter from an unknown person on Bristol lamenting the actions of the Greens there. I thought it was a hoax. No consultation with local parties. It was a direct mailshot but we were told there was no money for our local election address."

To work as a united team members must be engaged in, and share ownership of, their local campaigns.

And Finally ...

The NEC agreed that James Murray MP, the new health and social care secretary, would replace Wes Streeting MP as co-convenor of the NHS policy commission. Comments on the six national policy forum consultation documents should be submitted by 11 June 2026, and views on any policy at any time, all at

<https://nationalpolicyforum.labour.org.uk/#policy-form>

An update from the stakeholder team was postponed to the next meeting.

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