

National Executive Committee Meeting, 24 March 2026

The NEC met in Downing Street and vice-chair Peter Wheeler, deputising for Shabana Mahmood, welcomed members. Tributes were paid to former general secretary David Triesman, cancer campaigner Nathaniel Dye, Tony Blair's longtime agent John Burton, former MPs Phil Woolas and Kenneth Weetch, and councillors Alan Dowson, Waseem Zaffar, Olive Punchion and Aysha Raza.

General secretary Hollie Ridley thanked everyone who helped in the Gorton & Denton by-election and shared their disappointment. Record numbers of volunteers joined the campaign, with more than 1,000 out on polling day alone. A full analysis would follow, to learn the right lessons from this and other by-elections in a new and complex political space. Looking forward to May, the local elections which had been cancelled were now uncancelled, and candidates were being identified for every seat.

Hollie stressed that prudent financial management continued, spending only as resources allowed. The representation of the people bill would limit donations from overseas electors and bar cryptocurrency, as well as introducing votes at 16 for all UK elections and moving towards automatic voter registration.

NEC Decisions

Hollie regretted the need to re-run the Labour Students and Young Labour ballots. This was because members had been wrongly excluded if they joined after 8 June 2025, and they were told that the date was set by "the NEC". However the NEC delegates many of its powers to NEC officers, the business board, sub-committees, committee chairs, disciplinary panels, selection panels, the general secretary, senior staff, regional directors and others. If actual NEC members had been involved the error would have been corrected before a single vote was cast, and credit to Cat Arnold for first drawing attention to party rules. Candidates have the stress of another campaign, and some who succeeded initially may now lose their places. Results will be published as percentages, though some members argued for full transparency.

Delegation of powers was also raised in connection with Gorton & Denton, with NEC members discovering the timetable through the media like everyone else. Gemma Bolton pointed out that members expect their representatives to be aware of NEC decisions. Some argued that the full NEC should have decided on Andy Burnham's candidacy, and there were further requests for a formal scheme of delegation. For many years our terms of reference have required annual approval of a scheme which lays out what powers are delegated, to whom, and how their decisions are reported, but so far this has never materialised. The need to keep NEC members in the loop was accepted, but my successors will have to pursue the commitments in the terms of reference.

Have Your Say

Hollie noted that this year's national policy forum consultation had been launched, with documents open for comments up to 8 June 2026 and individuals and local parties able to contribute to any policy area at <https://nationalpolicyforum.labour.org.uk/#policy-form>. They can also contact their regional representatives, and I have asked for the nine NEC CLP representatives to be added. NPF members can now see all submissions on everything, so let me know if there is anything you are interested in.

I was glad to support Hollie against anonymous briefings which blamed her for losing the by-election, and holding her responsible if there are poor results in May. As I see it Labour's difficulties are primarily due to political decisions. The general secretary is in charge of organisation and management, and policy judgments are not her fault. In any case I would always raise concerns privately.

Getting There

Transport secretary Heidi Alexander joined the meeting. The government was steadily returning railways to public ownership with passengers at their heart, and regulated fares had been frozen. City regions would benefit from £15.6 billion over five years and she was working with mayors, providing £2.2 billion to Transport for London, extending the Birmingham metro to Solihull and transforming Manchester metro links. Northern powerhouse rail was going ahead and 13 new stations had been opened with another 19 to come. Bus fares continued to be capped at £3. Road quality was a big issue, with 400 Labour MPs queuing up to tell her about every pothole in their constituency, and cash support to councils had been doubled. Decarbonisation was important, including green aviation and modernising the use of airspace with more direct routes. Labour had approved a third runway at Heathrow and a second runway at Gatwick.

Treasurer's Report

The treasurer Mike Payne thanked the finance team for all their work. The party continued to face political, financial and organisational challenges, with many factors beyond our control, but always prioritised long-term stability over short-term fixes, keeping estimates cautious and aiming for balanced budgets. Currently income was exceeding targets. The party was supporting CLPs in dealing with HMRC, and Mike and I are involved in reviewing the NEC development funds and allocation of membership income: the system introduced in 2011 is not fit for purpose, and we hope to replace it before we both leave the NEC in September. Unite representatives explained their members' decision to reduce funding for the party, and resolving the long-running Birmingham bin strike would clearly help relations with all the unions.

Lucy Listens

Deputy leader Lucy Powell was doing what she could to assist in Birmingham, and Ian Murray of the Fire Brigades Union thanked her for attending their executive meeting: not an easy gig apparently. The trade unions' superpower was the ability to reach into workplaces and connect directly with ordinary people. She praised the incredible ground operation in Gorton & Denton, but stressed the importance of positive reasons for voting Labour if we were to lead the anti-Farage majority.

Lucy then reported on her members' survey. The response rate was 2.7%, though I don't know if this is based on paid-up members only, and whether it relates just to the two-thirds who receive party mails through Organise. Two-thirds of those who replied joined more than five years ago, with 44% citing values and beliefs among their top reasons for belonging. They rated the government highly on economic responsibility, public services, employment rights, the cost of living and climate change and energy policy, though members wanted stronger action to tackle the cost of living, more opportunities to get involved and to engage locally, and – as always – clearer communications and greater visibility. Lucy would follow up all of these, and continue to listen.

Members stressed the importance of new ways of campaigning, especially through social media, with some MPs more adept than others. On migration I raised concerns about imposing new rules retrospectively, so that people expecting to apply for indefinite leave to remain (ILR) after five years were suddenly told they now had to wait ten years. Lucy said that consultation was still open, and she hoped to get the right balance between secure borders and fair systems in line with Labour values.

Leader's Report

Keir Starmer then joined us. The situation in the Middle East continued to be serious and although this was not our war there were 300,000 UK citizens and service personnel in the region, under attack by Iran. He had therefore authorised the United States to use British bases to protect our interests and those of our allies. The recent extension was because Iran was now targeting ships, and still in line with the principle of collective self-defence. He believed he spoke for the majority of the country, and he would not give in to pressure or let Britain be dragged in. Instead he was seeking, with other countries, to de-escalate the situation. He understood concerns about the impact on household bills and, after a period of falling inflation and six interest rate cuts, inflation and rates might rise. However energy bills would be reduced by £100 in April, prices were capped till July, usage was low during summer, and the position would be reviewed in September. April would also see rises in the minimum wage, the end of the two-child benefit cap and new employment rights including sickness and bereavement leave from the first day in a job. Pride in Place initiatives were hugely popular, and being extended to 40 further areas.

Keir then responded to members on a range of issues. Several followed up my question to Lucy Powell on migration, and particularly the impact on social care workers who contribute so much. We should honour the promises made when they came here. Keir said these were powerful points, and he would keep them in mind. No decisions had yet been made, but I felt cautiously optimistic. Others urged the government not to wait till September to announce further protection against fuel price rises: people saw petrol going up by more than 10p per litre and our opponents were using the delay to frighten them now. Keir expected future support to be tailored rather than universal, but I hope that some guarantees can be brought forward.

Keir agreed that the school curriculum should include education in citizenship, so that children grow up learning to participate in democratic processes and ready to vote at 16. Labour would honour the manifesto pledge to equalise the minimum wage for younger workers, and he shared concerns about the safety of councillors and candidates. On Iran, both Reform and the Conservatives initially wanted unconditional support for Donald Trump but then went into screeching reverse. It was in our interests to cooperate closely with Europe on foreign policy, energy and the economy. He would follow up cuts to fire and rescue services proposed for Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, thanked trade union comrades for their loyalty and promised to work with them to show that Labour deserved their continued support.

During the lunchbreak I asked Keir if the government could stop Russia and Belarus being readmitted to the Olympic Games in 2028. They were excluded from the recent Winter Olympics, except for a few athletes competing as individuals, but accepted into the Winter Paralympics with flags, anthems and all the rest of it. Not a great message to send to Ukraine, and he seemed sympathetic.

Ready for Action

Party chair Anna Turley led the next session on preparing for the May elections. Currently the cost of living, migration and housing and homelessness were at the top of voters' concerns. Popular government actions included free school meals, falling NHS waits, rises in the minimum wage, scrapping the two-child benefit cap and cutting energy bills. Top campaign themes would be tackling the cost of living, the NHS, and communities. These elections would always have been difficult, with Labour defending peak results from 2022. Looking back, Labour lost 1,161 councillors in 1999 and 831 in 2003 but went on to win general elections in 2001 and 2005, while between 2010 and 2015 Labour won every set of local elections but lost the 2015 general election, so there is everything to play for in the next few years.

Traditionally the main battles were between Labour and Conservatives, with some competition from LibDems and Scottish and Welsh nationalists. Reform and the Greens posed new challenges, and hyper-local responses were needed for different situations. Reform were pushing a message of change against a failed establishment and claimed to be on the side of working people, despite voting to reject everything which actually increased their rights. They support tax cuts for the rich and threaten to privatise the NHS, and where they won control of councils they immediately broke their promises by raising council tax and cutting services. Their friends include Elon Musk, Tommy Robinson and Putin sympathisers, with some Reform leaders even opposing the vaccination programmes which protect public health.

The Greens presented themselves as a home for disillusioned progressives who are unhappy over Gaza, migration and Peter Mandelson, calling for stronger attacks on Reform and more help with the cost of living. In some ways they occupy a position similar to the LibDems between 1997 and 2010. To respond, Labour should showcase government achievements and publicise the Greens' failure to manage councils such as Brighton and Bristol, their support for legalising all drugs, their shaky economic credibility and their lack of commitment to NATO. The "squeeze message" had to be that only Labour can beat Reform, though it was pointed out that, following Caerphilly and Gorton & Denton, squeeze messages only work for Labour until they don't. Under first past the post the "progressive" vote can split and let Reform in, or go to other parties.

I queried some of the tactics. Green councillors in Oxford do not sell heroin outside school playgrounds, and local elections are more influenced by pavement politics and, sadly, by ugly lies on social media. To win the 2024 general election many constituency parties were prevented from campaigning in areas where the LibDems and Greens gained ground and are still recovering. Where councils face reorganisation some Labour leaders were advised to ask for elections to be postponed, took the flak for denying democracy, and then had to rearrange plans hastily when the elections were uncanceled. Others said that people needed hope and above all more effective communication of positive messages showing the benefits of Labour in power. Only 12% credit the government, rather than benevolent employers, with the minimum wage.

Devolution Dynamics

In Scotland the campaign focused on the need for change after two decades of SNP failure. The Welsh Senedd was using a new system with 16 constituencies each electing six members from closed party lists, similar to the old European elections, with outcomes possibly depending on a few hundred votes. The strapline was "Fairness you can feel – a new chapter for Wales" and they were working to defy the odds, aiming for Labour as at least the largest party in a progressive bloc. Reform were pushing the politics of division, and Plaid Cymru's manifesto continued many reviews but little action. The NEC wished them well.

Committee Round-Up

All the main subcommittees met in the weeks before the full NEC, and below are some key points. The Complaints and Disciplinary Subcommittee received updates on complaints, appeals, suspensions, panels and disciplinary cases. During January and February only two complaints were accepted as valid. In the same period nearly 900 people complained about the prime minister, the cabinet, or government policy or strategy. Though these are clearly not within the remit of the complaint procedures they provide valuable information and I asked for them to be directed to the national policy forum, the general secretary or the membership team. This was supported and, with limited staffing, AI (artificial intelligence) might help to identify common themes and sort incoming messages. Overall processing times are continuing to fall, though I still have a case awaiting conclusion after more than two years, and another member who has not been told of the allegations against them since being suspended six months ago.

The National Women's Committee heard harrowing stories of candidates and councillors subjected to abuse online and offline, particularly women, and particularly women from ethnic minorities. There were questions about whether local government selection procedures discriminate against women and those outside party networks, especially since the right to in-person appeals was withdrawn (another "NEC decision" which I knew nothing about). These procedures are being reviewed through the Organisation Committee, so that potentially good applicants can get a second chance without overwhelming regional interview panels. I have also asked for rejected applicants to receive more timely feedback, and no-one should have to put in a subject access request to find out the real reasons why they were turned down.

The Organisation Committee also approved procedures for "trigger ballots" which decide whether sitting Labour MPs can stand again at the next general election. These follow the model agreed by the NEC in 2021, where it seemed that I was the only person to possess a full record of previous deliberations, and should be non-threatening. MPs have been asked for their intentions and I expect that regional directors will be in touch with CLPs after May. It may seem early, but we have more than 400 MPs to get through. I also hope there will be time for other CLPs to choose their own candidates freely for the first time in over ten years, and that the NEC representatives elected this summer will take that commitment forward.

To Be Continued ...

When the rules for CLP officers were changed in 2023 I was assured that the position of vice-chair campaigns and membership could be split into two posts as a local variation, with approval from the regional director. Given the huge workload and the different skill sets required for the two parts of the role my own CLP applied and gained consent with no problem. I was surprised to see an identical request rejected in a different region, and hope to achieve a consistent and permissive approach.

Finally I continue to be asked about rules governing hybrid meetings. I have not forgotten, but I do not want restrictions from 2021 dredged up and used to prevent CLPs continuing to operate their own now well-established procedures, including secret ballots. As one wrote in a public forum:

"We have had successful hybrid meetings for a couple of years now. We have used Anonyvoter voting with people in the room and online at the same time. This works perfectly."

and I'm aware of others which allow remote voting to maximise inclusion, some with support from regional and national staff. The NEC should learn from them so that when the rules next require, we can hold valid ballots in our own hybrid meetings.

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