

# The Liberal Democrat education message

## David Laws MP

The election is fast approaching and I am delighted that education and making sure every child gets a fair start in life will be at the heart of our campaign. We have some strong messages for the doorstep which I am sure will be well received as we pound the pavements over the coming months.

As this a General Election issue, I thought it would be helpful to summarise our education message:

- Too many children are still leaving school without the knowledge and skills to be successful. Finding a good school is still a struggle, lessons often don't stretch the brightest, and classes are too big for teachers to control or give extra help to the children who need it. Children's family background still has a huge effect on how they do; a bright but poor child will fall behind a richer classmate by the age of 7 and never catch up.
- Liberal Democrats want every child to get an excellent education because it is the best way to get on in life, get a good job, and learn about the world. Only when all children get a good start, no matter where they live or what their parents do, will we have a fair society.
- We will provide a fair start for all children by giving schools the money they need to cut class sizes and set teachers free to spend more time teaching in the classroom.

### **Pupil Premium**

To give every child a fair start in life, the Liberal Democrats will spend an extra £2.5bn on schools, guaranteeing them the money they need to support children who are struggling. It will be targeted at schools taking on children who need more help and can be used to cut class sizes and make sure they get the individual support they need. An average primary school could cut classes to 20, with a typical secondary school able to cut classes to just 16.

### **Freedom for Schools**

Teachers want to get the best from children, but they are held back because of constant government interference which stops them from spending time with their pupils. The Liberal Democrats believe that all schools should be free from meddling politicians, to work in creative and interesting ways to make sure every child gets a fair start in life. We will slim down the curriculum and pass an Education Freedom Act banning politicians from getting involved in the day to day running of schools.

### **Confidence in Standards**

Politicians' meddling has undermined confidence in standards. The truth is, we don't know whether standards have slipped or exams are getting easier. That's why the Liberal Democrats will create a fully independent Education Standards Authority to act as the guardian of standards and stand up to politicians when they try and interfere. It will be responsible for ensuring exams are rigorous and that a suitable core curriculum is in place. And because it will report to Parliament, it won't be bullied by the Secretary of State. Taking the politics out of much of our education system is the only way to end the ongoing "dumbing-down" debate.

*David Laws is the MP for Yeovil, and Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families*

# Education and the Election

## David Bellotti

As we approach the General Election it is very clear this will be a defining moment for education.

The Labour government will be remembered for putting many more resources into our schools, colleges and universities than previous Conservative governments. However, they will also be remembered for creating much more bureaucracy and appointing hundreds of wasteful and unnecessary quangos to manage their far too many initiatives. For the future Labour would continue with their Building Schools for the Future programme and every School will become a Specialist School, a Trust School or an Academy.

The Conservative proposals would create as many new academies as possible. They will allow any application from a fit and proper person who can demonstrate good intent to set up an academy. Representations from a local council that a new academy would lead to surplus places in an area would not be a reason to turn the new academy down. Local Government would have to provide information, advice and support to those wanting to set up new academies. The Conservatives would also remove planning permission obstacles to new academies and remove section 106 obligations.

With the other parties moving rapidly towards a top (government) down model (and in the Conservative case bypassing local government completely) it is good to recognise that the Liberal Democrats offer a model where Local Government would be in a strategic role to ensure best provision of education in their area. Our proposal for Sponsor Managed Schools would result in pupils being able to access their full curriculum entitlement and ensure that there were sufficient places available. We would make Local Government responsible for the strategic oversight of admissions, whereas the Conservatives would allow the expulsion of pupils without any independent appeal. We would intervene locally when schools were performing badly. We would co-ordinate children's social and welfare services by supporting schools and colleges. We would control the principle programme of capital investment. The creation of an Education Freedom Act would ensure that politicians did not interfere on their day to day operation of schools and an Independent Education Standards Authority would make sure that poor councils were held to account.

The key message for the election is that voters can choose between the Conservatives creating a completely free market with all the consequences of the weak being left to fend for themselves, Labour again with its welcome resources but ever increasing bureaucracy and interference, or the Liberal Democrats working locally to deliver the best opportunities for the pupils and students. There is no promise of any new money from the Conservatives, Labour appear to be offering between £400M and £800M new money and we of course have our Pupil Premium proposals to address the issue of creating a more level playing field of opportunity at a cost of £2.5Billion.

As we approach the General Election we must use every opportunity to tell voters that the Conservative's proposal for 'Free Schools' would lead to the demise of state education. We must be equally clear that we will not allow any commercial or other organisation to set up schools with their own, sometimes hidden, agenda. Our agenda remains to ensure that every child and young person has the maximum opportunity to develop their own individual talent and abilities.

*David Bellotti is Liberal Democrat spokesperson for Children and Young People at the Local Government Association*

# School Governance: Shared Strategic Leadership

## Andrew Bridgwater

The very broadly based report of the Liberal Democrats' Schools Policy Working Group touched on aspects of School Governance whilst concentrating on other aspects of our schools. For this reason and the fact that this subject is everything to do with Liberalism, governance for a local community within that community, the LDEA decided in January to set up a School Governance Working Group. This initiative has been taken against a backdrop of both Labour and Conservative ambivalence at best regarding School Governance. We had an initial consultation session at the recent LGA Children and Young People's Conference in Nottingham.

In my experience of over 20 years as a school governor I was often struck with the variations both within and outside our Party on individuals' interpretation of what school governance should be. In sharp contrast members are now generally very clear what being a local councillor means, mainly derived from the landmark Community Politics resolution passed by the old Liberal Party in 1970. The Working Group's objective is to utilise the same principles for school governance to ensure full community and stakeholder participation. Do we need to change the composition of Governing Bodies to achieve this?

A key issue is to be clear about the role of Local Authority appointed Governors now that Schools largely manage themselves - which is already totally compatible with our policy on 'localism'. This also creates and strengthens a community political path for our own members' involvement and a greater recruiting ground for council candidates.

There are many similarities between the role of a local councillor and a school governor. Both are largely non-executive roles involving challenge and the support role of scrutiny. But too many Chairs of Governors and their Governing Bodies mainly rubber stamp their Headteacher's decisions and as a consequence do not carry out their scrutiny role fully or properly. More key and important decisions are taken by councillors in the Local Authority to which they are elected. Given that Headteachers are normally governors, should we follow this model in school Governing Bodies?

My experience of working in very good and excellent Governing Bodies (OFSTED's verdict not mine!) is that we largely achieved this objective, which I define as Shared Strategic Leadership. This strengthens the senior leadership of schools, thereby giving the best educational and developmental experience to our children and young people.

Why do so many Headteachers not support this approach? Amazingly there is no governance training given during teacher training and still too little in the training of Headteachers. I have had to do this myself as a Chair of Governors with appointees to their first Headteacher posts who are quite clearly not sure what the Governing Body's role should be. But in my experience giving a middle manager the chance to broaden their strategic management experience as a Teacher or Staff Governor contributes to the qualities and experience they will need to take on a senior leadership role.

The Working Group needs to, and will, closely examine the role of training not only for school governors but also school leadership teams. This should be delivered locally but to agreed national minimum standards. We will also examine the extent to which compulsion should be used and how. We need to establish effective mentoring and induction training for new governors. In recruiting we need to establish the relative priorities in recruiting people with existing skills as well as developing the skills of new governors, in particular parents.

But in the first instance, why do so many of us assume that everyone knows what school governance means and what school Governing Bodies do? My experience suggests that

explaining to parents, staff and those within local communities what is involved as a school governor, and what school Governing Bodies do, significantly increases the level of interest. This is, after all, what we do in recruiting council candidates, so really it is just extending the same principle. In particular we need to challenge the current difficulties in our most deprived communities and raise aspirations to be involved.

**The Working Group is determined to consult as widely as possible and will be doing so at our AGM in Birmingham at 8pm on Friday 12 March at Room 6 at the Crown Plaza Hotel where you are all very welcome. In addition we have opened an email account where you can send your comments. Mail to [ideasgwg@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ideasgwg@yahoo.co.uk)**

After Birmingham we be 'on hold' until after the General Election. In the meantime we really want your comments. They will considerably enhance our future work.

*Andrew Bridgwater is the Chair of the LDEA School Governance Working Group. He has been a School Governor for over 20 years and was a Hackney Councillor from 1998 to 2002*

## Some reflections on governance

### Anthony Bowen

I'm just about to step down after 14 years as a governor, in the name of the University of Cambridge, of an independent foundation. It comprises three schools, a boys' grammar school over 500 years old, a girls' high school over 150 and a much more recent mixed preparatory school. I've been governor of two state schools in Cambridge, primary and secondary, for nearly as long, and in Shropshire before that. Comparisons are interesting.

Much is the same. Appoint the right head, and all is well. Fortunately, we have, in all the schools I govern. When I began, that was almost the beginning and end of governing. Now I add, appoint the right bursar (or equivalent). My primary school is too small for that, but is a feeder of my secondary, and as an increasing number of things is done co-operatively, I can see that coming. Shared, it can probably be afforded; meantime we primary governors spend much time and effort on the finances. It is interesting and important, and it is very much in line with the Government's thinking about what school governors should do; I have my doubts about its efficiency.

Some things are different, very. My independent foundation selects its pupils and charges fees. Selection is for the heads to do, but is related to size, and the number as well as the ability of the pupils is related to staffing, curriculum and pupil-teacher ratios. Selective schools ought to be economical to run because they can be as homogeneous as you like; but the parents expect extras. So setting the fees is our other big business. Biggest item in the budget is staff salaries. The Government's improvement of teachers' salaries has put enormous pressure on the independent sector, which likes to keep just ahead.

Not all independent schools are charities, but most older ones are. (It is commonly thought that independent schools are old, single-sex, secondary and boarding. The variety is in fact vast; most are day schools, most are co-educational, and most – in number but not in size – are basically primary in age-range.) A new pressure has emerged from the Government's demand that charitable status be earned. The Charity Commission has begun its examinations, and lawyers and advisers are making good money testing and contesting the Commission's ideas and its findings. Five schools in England have been investigated: two failed, because they did not offer enough by

way of bursaries. It looks as though the Commission will stick with bursaries as the main and almost the only measure of public benefit.

Independent education cannot be abolished, but much of it can be undermined. The Government may at last have found a way of undermining it widely.

What might a Conservative government do? Advisers of the independent sector expect them not to be openly sympathetic to it, and not to intervene on the measure of public benefit; but the half a million children in independent schools will probably be reduced somewhat for other reasons, principally financial and managerial. The bigger schools have large, able and various governing bodies; lesser ones don't.

Few advisers note or know LibDem thinking on schools; we focus on the public provision. We are seen as like Labour: likely to be hostile. On the other hand, we are seen as pragmatic: likely to leave well alone; our power in a coalition of any sort would be exercised in other areas. But, well alone?

***Anthony Bowen** was a schoolmaster for 30 years, a don for the last 20 and a Local Authority governor of schools from Infant to SFC over the last 30*

## Education post-16

### Stephen Williams MP

It remains the policy of the Liberal Democrats to scrap tuition fees for all students undertaking their first undergraduate level degree. I believe it is right both in principle and in practice to scrap the tuition fee model of part-financing for higher education. In addition, it is right that part and full-time students should be treated equally, whatever the system, when studying for their first degree. We will therefore also abolish fees for part-time students studying for a first undergraduate level degree.

This does not mean that universities will lose funding; the income they currently receive as a result of fees will continue to be paid by the government. Although the Liberal Democrats remain committed to this policy we have had to be realistic about the state of the UK's deficit after Gordon Brown's failure to steer this country successfully through the recession. The economic downturn has seriously constrained the spending options of any future government. As such, Nick Clegg announced in January 2010 that whilst our Party retains its pledge to abolish tuition fees, we would have to do so over a six-year timeframe.

The reasoning for retaining this commitment to scrapping tuition fees is simple: we believe that a student's potential should not be limited by their ability to pay. Taking maintenance loans and fee loans together, many students will be starting their working lives with a debt of over £20,000. This is unacceptable and unsustainable, particularly given the current level of graduate unemployment.

Indeed, the current outlook for young people - of all backgrounds - is one of real hardship. They have borne the brunt of the recession and need a government that will offer them realistic support. Resolving this situation is one of the Liberal Democrats' key priorities, so we have set out emergency measures to help the young unemployed, whatever their skill set might be. Through our economic stimulus and job creation package, we would invest almost £900 million in increasing the number of further education places, giving students financial support to return to college and creating a paid internship scheme. We think that there should be a 90-day promise, so that no young person should be unemployed for more than 90 days before they are able to get training, education, an internship or a place on a work program. We would bridge the gap by offering paid, funded internships. Unemployed people are being funded anyway by the Department for Work & Pensions through their jobseeker's allowance (JSA), and it would be much better to pay £55 a week so that they could take up an internship in a company. In the present context, paid internships instead of JSA would provide a much more productive and meaningful experience for young people at what should be the start of their working careers.

There should also be more funding for apprenticeship places. Funding should be drawn from the Train to Gain budget and targeted at adults who need to improve their skills by returning to college or completing apprenticeships, especially for the off-the-job training costs of those who are taking up apprenticeships in small and medium-sized enterprises. In particular, we need more engineering and construction apprentices in order to build a low carbon economy.

There is a need in the long run to rebalance the funding levels received by adults for different modes and settings of study. For far too long further education has been treated as the 'unloved middle child' of English education. A levelling of the playing field is long overdue: the higher education sector currently receives around £12bn of Government funding compared with the £3.5bn awarded to the further education sector for adult skills. Further education students must be treated in the same time as higher education students. So, the Liberal Democrats would begin by fully funding an individual's first Level 3 qualification regardless of their age, and their first

degree, whether studied for part-time or full-time. Over time we would also offer maintenance support to adult FE learners on the same basis as home based HE students.

Through education and skills we can drive social mobility and build a sustainable and prosperous future.

*Stephen Williams is MP for Bristol West and Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills*

## Free To Be Young

### Linda Jack

Life for young people growing up in Britain is not always good. Our children and young people are the unhappiest of all the OECD countries, more likely to be out of work than anywhere else in Europe, and are often demonised by the media and society as a whole. Their life chances can be stunted and when they need support they find a safety net full of holes.

The Youth Policy Working Group – under the leadership of Laura Willoughby and latterly myself, has spoken to young people and the organisations who work with them as well as reviewing current research, in order to come up with a policy that creates a framework in which young people can thrive and prosper. A framework based on our key value of freedom and underpinned by our belief that “no – one should be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity”.

We want young people to have access to a broader curriculum at school, to be free from the burden of tuition fees, to have access to the information, advice and guidance they need to be able to grow and develop. We want them to have things to do and places to go and for those who work with them to be able to access financial support more easily. We want government to have a more holistic approach to youth issues with the establishment of a cross departmental committee of junior ministers and we will place a duty on public bodies to ensure they carry out youth policy impact assessments. We will ensure that anyone under 24 claiming Job Seekers Allowance for more than 3 months will have guaranteed access to training or work. We will end the discriminatory minimum wage for young people and will ensure votes at 16. We will campaign to promote positive images of young people and will expect the media to do the same.

**So our message to young people and those who work with them is, we have listened to you, we value you and we will do our best to ensure our policies enable you to be the best you can be, a ladder of opportunity and a safety net when you need it.**

*Linda Jack is Chair of the Liberal Democrat Youth Policy Working Group*

*You can find this Policy Paper at [http://www.libdems.org.uk/spring\\_conference\\_papers.aspx](http://www.libdems.org.uk/spring_conference_papers.aspx)*

# North of England Education Conference, York 2010

## Peter Downes

Peter Downes attended this high profile annual conference as a Cambridgeshire County Councillor and has provided this summary of the key political issues arising:

### Understanding child poverty and child well-being

Professor Jonathan Bradshaw, associate director of the Social Policy Research Unit, based at York University, said child poverty rates in Britain today are still double what they were in 1979. And he warned that in many respects, the Government's strategy to eradicate child poverty by 2020 has failed.

Prof Bradshaw said the UK had not spent enough on the problem, adding that at least an extra £5 billion was needed to reach the 2010 poverty target. While the UK is successful in some child poverty areas, such as improving housing conditions, the nation is far behind in other areas, Prof Bradshaw said, describing high levels of teenagers not in education, employment or training as "awful". He added: "Given our wealth, our children should be doing much better than they are."

EU and OECD reports published last year showed the UK 24th out of 29 and 20th out of 30 countries for child wellbeing.

Highlighting the link between poverty and school achievement, Prof Bradshaw referred to research to be published shortly, showing that less than a fifth (19%) of pupils at foundation level (up to five years old) who were in poverty and experienced bad parenting were performing at a good level of achievement. In comparison, almost three quarters (73%) of those not in poverty with good parenting were performing at a good level. Some 58% of those in poverty with good parenting reached a good level, while 47% of children not in poverty with bad parenting reached a good level. "The conclusion from this", he said, "is that parenting matters, but so does poverty, and one can effectively undermine the other."

### Leadership and Learning in a changing world

Dylan Wiliam, Deputy Director, Institute of Education, London had some salutary warnings for those looking for simple solutions to complex educational issues:

- Low skills jobs are vanishing faster in the recession and the main competitive skill schools should be developing is the **ability to learn**, rather than worrying overmuch about the content of what you learn.
- Classroom assistants do not necessarily help the struggling learner to learn better but they do help the struggling teacher to keep better control. Too many TAs do too much of the difficult work for the pupils.
- School choice is much less important than people think; the output of academies and grammar schools is only average.
- It doesn't matter which **school** you are in but it does matter which **classroom** you are in because it is the teacher that makes the difference.
- Master's degrees don't make teachers better.
- Improving the quality of the teaching profession must be the top priority but it cannot be done simply by raising the bar for entry. That would take 30 years so we must improve the performance of currently employed staff.
- Results improve more when teachers emphasise creativity and imagination more than simply teaching for the test.

### Political and cultural forces that impede children's educational potential

In a controversial address, Yasmin Alibhia-Brown, a columnist for the *Independent*, said that inequality was the UK's biggest handicap and it affects children more than adults. She

commented on how childhood is changing more rapidly than ever before with children sitting more watching screens of various sizes, more obesity, asthma, brains over-stimulated in a superficial and transitory way. Children need real food, real play and to experience the real world. She claimed that parents assume too much ownership of children, and is opposed to the idea that groups of parents can set up their own schools to 'possess' their children and alienate them from the nasty world outside. Children have to be liberated from the confines of their own family. "No more faith-based schools", she pleaded to the politicians in the audience.

### **Political positions**

Michael Gove, Conservative Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, made the following points in anticipation of being in control of the country from May and in answer to questions.

- Only people with 'good' degrees will be allowed to train as teachers. Teachers who undertake supplementary training will concentrate on subject knowledge rather than Teaching and Learning.
- Discipline in classrooms will be paramount. Teachers and schools to have much more power to exclude.
- Our current academic performance is not good enough, especially for boys on FSM (he compared them with the outstanding performance of boys at Eton!).
- Pluralism, diversity choice in school provision – the market-place will raise standards. He praised Alberta and Sweden and Charter Schools in the USA, and said how impressed he has been on his visits to Academies.
- Local Authorities should be doing more to raise standards in schools (!). They are not service providers but will be commissioners and standards watchdogs.
- Heads must be able to get rid of incompetent teachers more easily.
- Tory capital funding distribution will be 'more rational'. The funding for the new schools sponsored by faith groups, parents, private industry etc will come out of the BSF pot.

David Laws, Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, laid out how the LibDems differ from both Conservatives and Labour. He said that the Conservatives have over-argued the negatives and Labour have an exaggerated view of how well they have done. In his balance sheet

- Educational performance **has** risen.
- There **has** been major long overdue investment since 1999.
- There are **very many** good schools in the country and they are not just public schools or Academies.

### ***BUT the serious challenges are***

- Half the population still doesn't do well enough at 16.
- The gap between the poor and the wealthy is far too great and greater than in most other countries.
- There is confusion over exam results with too much teaching to the test, lack of comparability between subjects.
- The system is driven too much by data.
- There has been excessive central government interference.
- We are entering a new Dark Age of education funding which will take us back to the years of John Major as PM.

### ***The three Lib Dem priorities, if they were in a position to exert influence in the event of a balanced Parliament, would be***

1. **Greater freedom** for the education system (politicians are not endowed with universal wisdom!). We should reduce the size and scope of the DCSF, reduce the number of quangos and make them totally independent of government, allow greater freedom for

schools to innovate, streamline the National Curriculum, and enhance the role of the Local Authority.

2. **Improve education funding**, by reducing the inequalities across the country, reforming the existing funding system which works against rural disadvantage, and establish the Pupil Premium for the pupils with greatest need to provide the extra help they need and to incentivise schools to take them. The extra £2.5 billion to be found from the LD tax changes.
3. **Drive up improvement through better leadership, teaching and governance.** The market-place approach cannot work and could be very damaging, LAs should have a real role in holding schools to account, supported by a new Educational Standards Authority. Exams must be more comparable and vocational options should be retained. We need 'intelligent accountability', as advocated by ASCL. We should phase out Specialist Schools' financial incentives – all schools should offer all subjects to an acceptable level. We should recycle money within the financial distribution system.

**Liberal Democrats would also argue for more reflective legislation because hyperactivity is destabilising.**

Vernon Coaker, Minister for Schools and Learning, started with generous praise for teachers and TAs who have worked so hard to raise standards. Schools, he said, can't produce improvement in children's lives in isolation. He emphasised the link with Children's Services and Every Child Matters. He listed the successes of the Labour government and promised yet more.

Rising standards (there will be 0 failing schools by the end of next year).

Labour has injected lots of money into revenue and capital after chronic under-funding from Thatcher and Major.

They will continue the successes of Sure Start and the new investment in individual tuition will benefit the most deprived.

From September schools will be measured by a Report Card and they have responded to pressure from the professional associations to make the Card cover more than academic results.

There will be a new primary curriculum from 2011.

The Children's Trust Boards, Family Nurse teams and Family Intervention have all had a beneficial impact and better to come.

"We can be proud of what we have done", he said, "and our vision is of schools making a difference within the community, not in isolation". In answer to a critical question about poor liaison with the health sector, he said he would take the point back to his colleagues and see what could be done.

***Peter Downes** was a comprehensive school Headteacher for 21 years and is now Education Spokesman for the Liberal Democrats on Cambridgeshire County Council*

## **Our recent conference in Nottingham**

### **Carol Runciman**

Unlike some other political parties, Liberal Democrats make policy from the bottom up – not from the top down. So instead of the party leaders coming out with policies that their members know nothing about and have never heard of before, we talk to those in the business and then develop policy motions to bring to Federal Conference.

Education and children's social care are high on everyone's agenda at the moment. Recently a group of Liberal Democrat activists and councillors, all involved in some way in children's services, gathered together at the LGA LibDem Group's Education Conference in Nottingham, to talk about the issues of the day. We included teachers from schools, colleges and universities, social workers, school governors, parents and grandparents. Many of them were also LibDem councillors, both council leaders and Lead Members for Children's Services. We came from all over the country, Somerset, London, Stockton, Newcastle, Sheffield, Bath, Blackburn, Derby and many others. There were two of us from York and we went so we could take the opportunity to discuss issues of concern and exchange ideas. Liberal Democrat teams of MPs and Peers from the Commons and the Lords were there too, talking about legislation going through the House at the moment and joining in the discussions and debates.

We talked about important current issues, such as cutting costs not quality, good practice in school improvement, 16 – 19 education funding delegation, academies and trusts and, of course, safeguarding children. I ran this particular workshop, which was very well attended and produced some lively discussions and a helpful exchange of thoughts on a very serious subject.

All the ideas that come out of the conference will be taken back by the parliamentarians to be fed into the debates held there. Events such as this are what makes the Liberal Democrats truly democratic – everyone can be involved and many are able to contribute.

*Carol Runciman is Executive Member for Children and Young People and Deputy Leader of the City of York Council*

## **Choice and Diversity: bad for democracy**

### **Helen Flynn**

One of the main directions of travel behind education policy coming from the three main political parties over recent years has been to expand choice and diversity-- in effect, to marketise state education. The already bewildering array of state schools, encompassing foundation, voluntary-aided, voluntary-controlled, CTC's, grammar, specialist, community, etc, has seen new additions. The Labour party has given us Academies and Trust Schools and has overseen a creeping presence of privatisation in the educational services sector. The Conservatives want to massively expand the Academy Programme and to incorporate the primary sector into it. They also go one step further and want to encourage people to set up their own 'free schools', and will give them taxpayer money to do so. The Lib Dems, though wanting to re-empower local authorities as the commissioners of services and lead strategists in local area provision, would also let these authorities allow 'sponsors' to set up schools.

Parents are now customers of the education marketplace, and children are the consumers. How the choice and diversity agenda can be married with the growing tide of evidence that we are seeing the greatest gap between those with the most and those with the least since the beginning of the last century, and that we preside over one of the most unequal countries in the developed world, is not obvious. Essentially this is a populist agenda, as it appeals to the self interest each parent has in gaining a place at the best school possible for their child, and does not encourage members of local communities to consider the best provision for the community as a whole. Worst of all it encourages the false belief amongst a large part of the population that they have choice, when exercising that choice for them is virtually impossible.

Those armed with the greatest knowledge and financial means are those with the greatest amount of choice. They can move house to arrive in appropriate catchment areas at the right time; they can manipulate the system by attending church for the correct number of years; in grammar areas they can tutor their children to pass exams; and they can opt out of the state system completely and pay for education. Under Conservative proposals, these same few can even set up their own school with taxpayer money to tailor the right product to suit their need.

Choice and diversity thus encourages a perpetual hierarchy of schools. Saddest of all in this growing agenda of schools marketisation has been the fact that headteachers and senior leadership teams across the country have gone along with it. And they have substantial reason to do so. They have seen that they have to scramble after whatever cash is on offer from whatever pot (and Local Authorities have done this as well), if they are going to gain the extra resources they need for their pupils and gain a top spot in the league tables. They have adjusted to the new reality of state education in this country: divide and rule.

Though nods have been made to shared ways of working, such as federation, this has often been encouraged as a cost-saving and efficiency measure, rather than true strategic management of area provision. Furthermore, schools will often federate with schools that are similarly “excellent”, rather than seek to join with their lower-performing neighbours to create sensible, joined-up provision and share best practice, to benefit whole communities.

Can we re-ignite the language of a state system designed to meet the needs of all and that promotes equality of opportunity, whilst not scaring off Middle England with its abiding fear of a system designed for the “lowest common denominator”? Finding our way out of the last 31 years, where self interest has been encouraged to reign is not going to be easy. But the Liberal Democrats are the party best placed to begin this new conversation with the electorate. The sooner we start it, the better.

*Helen Flynn is PPC for Skipton and Ripon and NEC Member of CASE (the Campaign for State Education)*

## Early Years and parenting

### Annette Brooke MP

The Sutton Trust has recently reported that children growing up in the poorest fifth of families lag almost one year behind their middle-class counterparts in vocabulary tests by the time they turn five. Sir Peter Lampl from the Trust is reported as saying "These findings are at once both shocking and encouraging - revealing the stark educational disadvantage experienced by children from poorer homes before they have even stepped into the school classroom, but also the potential for good parenting to overcome some of the negative impacts that poverty can have on children's early development."

The findings really do support longstanding Liberal Democrat policy. For a long time we have said early education is the most important phase of learning. If we get it right at this stage, we know it makes a lifelong difference, and that there are tremendous benefits in terms of human experience, as well as financial savings to be made. As you will know, our latest policy proposes paid parental leave such that parents may choose to take up to 19 months parental leave, not more than 12 months may be taken by either parent, but single parents would be entitled to up to 19 months leave. This is complemented with an offer of up to 20 hours a week free childcare/early learning provision from the age of 18 months. The quality of the content and delivery of the 20 hours a week provision will be of high importance.

Given the current economic climate, sadly this policy is not going to appear as an immediate commitment in our General Election Manifesto - but it is important to keep our aspirations. Much has been achieved in the last 13 years, but there is still a long way to go before we can match the offers, for example, in Scandinavian countries. The policy underlies the importance of making strong early attachments, involving both parents pre birth and in the critical first year. We agree with the Sutton Trust that parenting programmes should be included within these core offers. Ensuring that all Children's Centres are operating efficiently and effectively and reaching the most disadvantaged families is vital.

The acceptance of extended shared parental leave is something that we have to work at with the business community, along with the acceptance of a right to request flexi time by all workers. As a society we need to ask ourselves how can we best support family life and our children's futures?

I fear the challenges of providing good quality learning experiences, in conjunction with a well trained and better salaried early years workforce in sustainable settings, will remain with us for a long time. But as Liberal Democrats we must not lose sight of the end goals in these difficult times.

*Annette Brooke is MP for Mid Dorset and North Poole, and Liberal Democrat Shadow Children's Minister*

## Age of entry to school

### Wendy Scott

The Independent Review of Primary Education, the Rose Review of 2009, recommends that all children should start school in the September before they become five, so many will be only just four. Several recent studies have shown that current provision in reception classes is failing too many children, who are being turned off learning, or misdiagnosed as having special educational

needs. Summer born children and boys are particularly vulnerable. Recent ministerial proposals that schools should reserve places for children whose parents wish them to remain in pre-school up to statutory school age are welcome, coupled as they are with an entitlement to 25 hours of nursery provision a week. Pre-schools would become more sustainable, and benefit from having older children as role models. Flexible admissions, which demand a responsive approach to induction, assessment, curriculum planning and transitions, would require primary schools to adapt organisation and teaching to meet the needs of individual children.

This policy needs more money than is available through the Early Years Single Funding Formula, already insufficient to support effective provision and practice. Parents are unlikely to risk losing a place at popular primary schools, and the imminent election may limit options. In principle, annual admission must emphatically not be seen as lowering the age of compulsory schooling, of the reception year and on into Year 1 complies with the expectations of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

The Cambridge Review of the primary curriculum advocates this approach, which implies access to provision outdoors and improved staffing ratios, as proposed in the LibDem policies for primary education. It is critical that OFSTED and School Improvement Partners fully understand and promote the pedagogy that underpins effective work in the early years.

*Wendy Scott is an early years consultant with long experience in practice, which underpins her academic, inspection, advisory and international work*

## Early Years: play and learning

### Wendy Scott

Two recent reviews of the primary curriculum in England recommend the continuation of the approach to teaching expected in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) into Year 1 and beyond, and endorse the value of play for young children's learning and development. The *Rose Review*, commissioned by the government, states that "Play is not a trivial pursuit. Drawing on a robust evidence base, the interim report highlighted the importance of learning through play...The purposes of play in promoting learning and development should be made explicit and planned opportunities made to fulfil them in the primary curriculum". The extensively researched *Cambridge Review of the Primary Curriculum*, led by Robin Alexander, acknowledges the importance of play in learning, notes that this demands a more complex pedagogy than traditional transmission, memorisation and recall, and advocates the continuation of the Foundation Stage up to the age of six. Alexander has written in a letter dated 21.1.2010 "*We have encountered enormous enthusiasm for the Cambridge Review's final report and an eagerness in schools, local authorities and teacher education institutions to take forward its thinking and proposals. There is considerable evidence of a desire for change both in policy and at the educational grass roots.*"

Guidance for the EYFS endorses the role of play for the youngest children in school. The phrase "planned purposeful play" has been clarified in further guidance from the DCSF which says clearly that practitioners cannot plan children's play because this would work against the choice and control that are central features of play; rather, they must plan **for** play by creating high quality learning environments and ensuring uninterrupted periods for children to develop their own purposes through their play.

In a forthcoming book, Fisher argues that “In play, no-one gives boundaries to the learning, so children explore at the very edges of their own experience, reasoning and imagination.” She points out that there are many skills that are more effectively learned through the trial and error of play than through direct teaching, and provides evidence of raised levels of motivation and achievement among children in Year 1 who have extended opportunities for play. These improved outcomes are predictable: children following an adult-initiated activity are constrained by what has been planned whereas there are no limits applied in play. Another forthcoming volume, by Broadhead, Howard and Wood, makes recommendations for future research as well as reporting on recent studies of play, and their implications for practice.

This information, confirmed in inspection reports and Local Authority data needs to be widely disseminated at a time when external demands for intended learning outcomes in the EYFS as well as in Key Stage 1 so often undermine the confidence of staff, and parents too, in the power of active, open-ended learning. The priority given to literacy belies the principle that all areas of learning have equal importance, and has distorted children’s experiences over the past ten years. There are particular concerns about the situation in too many reception classes, where practice does not match the statutory expectations of the EYFS. We must address the deplorable situation highlighted in December 2009 by the Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, at the launch of guidance focusing on encouraging young boys to write, when she said “Some boys are anxious about writing. They may feel they haven’t mastered the skills - like phonics and handwriting.” These worries, which lead to a sense of failure and a loss of motivation, stem from premature teaching of concepts that are not embedded in a context that interests individual children, nor consolidated through meaningful applications. We must ease the counterproductive pressures exerted on staff and children by the literacy Early Learning Goals, which are increasingly stressful due to the Outcomes Duty laid on Local Authorities. Recent evidence confirms the conviction among many parents and practitioners that too much is expected too soon from children in England: a quantitative study in New Zealand shows that children who start formal reading at five have no advantage at eleven over those who start at seven.

Training should enable staff to understand the vital role of play in early learning and how to evaluate children’s progress through formative assessment, providing opportunities to reflect on their observations and consider implications for future planning. Although apparently easy going, effective early years pedagogy demands high levels of insight from staff, combining deep knowledge of child development and curriculum. It also needs to be informed by self-awareness together with sensitivity to individual children and their families, taking account of special needs as well as cultural differences which influence attitudes, expectations and practice in early education and care. After the forthcoming election, we shall discover whether politicians and officers at local as well as central levels are at last prepared to trust the principled judgement of well-qualified professionals.

*Wendy Scott is an early years consultant with long experience in practice, which underpins her academic, inspection, advisory and international work*

# Looked After Children: why do they come into our care?

## Carol Runciman

Almost every council in the country is experiencing a significant increase in the numbers of children coming into care. This leads to pressures on the budget and the need to recruit more foster carers – many of them with special skills and knowledge.

Looking after children when things go wrong in the family is a problem that has been with society for a very long time. In the past, if parents died or abandoned their children, it was often the case that relatives would step in and care for them. This still happens, but these days they have to apply for a **Special Guardianship Order** to have legal responsibility for them. They have to be assessed by a Social Worker as to their suitability and then make application to the courts. There are children like that in schools today; for example where parents have died in a car accident.

The cases highlighted by the media are usually cases where the child (or more often, children) has to come into care because they are abused in some way. The two most horrific types of abuse are sexual and physical and the recent Baby Peter case illustrated both. In a typical family situation of a mother with a new partner, usually after having had a number of relationships, Baby Peter was physically abused leading to his death, and his slightly older sister was sexually assaulted. This is the extreme end of the spectrum, but if Social Workers know that there is a risk of such things happening (perhaps from a previous history), they will try to get into the family early and either put in preventative measures (such as a court order to exclude the man) or a lot of support – often called early intervention measures. As a last resort, they go to court for a **Care Order** to take the children into the care of the Local Authority.

This is why all work on prevention and early intervention in Children's Social care Departments is so important and why all agencies need to talk to each other about families that concern them. This will include Accident and Emergency Departments at local hospitals, who may see the first signs of trouble. The police have a key part to play too, as this type of abuse is often linked with domestic violence and they are regularly called out to deal with such incidents. It may be that Social Workers take the case to court for a **Supervision Order**, so they can keep an eye on the children, although they leave them within the family. It may be that only a Care Order is sufficient to safeguard the child or children from harm. All agencies involved discuss such concerns strategically at the local **Children's Trust Board** and at the **Local Children's Safeguarding Board**.

The increasing numbers coming into court and then into care at the moment, however, are usually cases of neglect. I see many of such cases in my work as a Family Court Magistrate (in Leeds, which is where I used to live) and this will be the focus of the work of York's LSCB for this next year. In a recent case here in York, very young children were neglected so much that they had to be taken into care and looked after by foster carers. Both parents were in the home, but one may have been suffering from a mental disorder and the other was intimidated and did not let in any of the agencies (or any relatives) to see the children. This type of case is usually the subject of a **Serious Case Review**, written by an independent social worker (not from the same authority). It is often difficult for SWs to get into such homes; there is often a violent partner and frequently a couple of large dogs. The state of the home can be dire and the children unkempt and neglected. Frequently substance misuse plays a significant part in the parents' life style. In this type of case, the parents will still be allowed to see their children after the order is made but under careful supervision of staff, in the terms of a **Contact Order** made by the court.

Other similar cases would be where the parents are drug users and are unaware of the children and their needs. I always say that the drugs win over the needs of the children – drugs are very powerful drivers of behaviour. If the children are old enough to be at school, then they will sometimes talk about what is going on or the schools will pick up the signs of neglect, such as the child is dirty, hungry, often late (as they are left to get themselves to school at whatever age) or generally withdrawn and unhappy. If the children are pre-school, then we hope the **Health Visitor service** will pick up the problems early enough, but there are issues around the number and deployment of HVs at present that we are taking up with the PCT. Once again, after a lot of help and support has been given to the family, if the situation still continues, the case may need to go to court and a **Care Order** may be made.

If the children are young enough and there is no chance that they can go back to their families, then the court may free them for Adoption and the **Adoption Service** takes over. If they are older, then they are more likely to be Fostered but it is always best to keep siblings together if possible, so some Foster Carers will look after groups of three or more children, in special circumstances. They may also look after very young mothers, who themselves may be the subject of a **Care Order**, and the baby could be subject of a Care Order too. Both of them may have had to leave home, as the family just can't cope.

Finally, Foster Carers work with a number of severely disabled children with complex health needs whose parents find them very difficult to care for every day of the week and every week of the year. Families in York are linked to a **Sharing Care** family, who can offer respite when things get bad or when there is a special event going on that the child with a disability simply cannot attend (perhaps a wedding or a funeral) or to give the parents a break from the pressure of looking after the child 24/7. Sometimes such children come into care as babies but increasingly that is not the case and they stay with their parents at home and go to their local school or a special school.

It is a complex area and this article is designed to give an understanding of matters that social care staff deal with every day of their lives – not just in work time. If there is a problem with a child, it can't wait until the office opens, it has to be dealt with there and then. It is a stressful business.

*Carol Runciman is Executive Member for Children and Young People and Deputy Leader of the City of York Council*