

LDEA School Governance Working Group

The Liberal Democrat Education Association currently has a Working Group on School Governance. This is the Working Group's consultation document. LDEA is keen to have your thoughts, ideas and views. Please send them to Ideasgwg@yahoo.co.uk or to Andrew Bridgwater, Vice Chair of LDEA and Chair of the Working Group.

Shared Strategic Leadership

We believe that excellent governance is achieved with the shared strategic leadership of the Governing Body and the Headteacher together with the senior leadership team of a School. This should deliver and develop educational opportunities for school pupils both now and for the future, working with partners as necessary in order to achieve these objectives. In addition Governing Bodies have varying executive responsibilities regarding property, finance, and human resources but their main function is as a non-executive scrutiny body.

Work in Progress

We have had one consultative session at the LGA Children and Young Persons Conference held last February and an initial two meetings of the Working Group. Our work so far has concentrated on drafting the above statement on the principles behind School Governance but like the other issues raised below we want your input. The questions are not meant to be comprehensive but should enable the issues to be fully addressed

Role of Governing Bodies and their Scrutiny, and Local Authority Governors

Do you agree with the above statement on Shared Strategic Leadership, and if not how should it be amended? In particular should the executive function be changed?

Should the balance of responsibility for the School be shifted from the Headteacher to the Governing Body, of which the Headteacher is a member? Is it right that Headteachers tend to be the sole scapegoat when things go wrong such as a bad OFSTED Report?

We are proposing that Local Authority Scrutiny and Overview Boards should scrutinise the work of Governing Bodies, particularly in failing Schools. Do you agree or do you have a different idea? NB.Scrutiny of individual schools should be confidential, excluding press and public.

What is your view on the role of Local Authority Governors? Do they still provide a role and input to the work of Governing Bodies or not? If you believe they do should we change the way they are selected or not? Should they have to be approved before being eligible and by whom? What should be their relationship with the Local Authority?

Involvement of Parents, Local Communities, Young People and Staff

We would like your input on initiatives to encourage these stakeholders, particularly Liberal Democrats, to become involved. How do we ensure that these groups are clearly informed about the role of School Governors and by whom so that they have the confidence to progress their interest?

Should Young People, ie pupils, be eligible to be School Governors? If so what age limit should apply?

How can we ensure that Staff Governors fulfil their dual role as Governors and Employees, in particular the scrutiny role of the Governing Body?

Good training and mentoring of new School Governors

How do we ensure that there is a minimum standard of training of School Governors? Should Governing

Bodies or Local Authorities be responsible for training and/or mentoring of new Governors? Or if not either who?

To what extent should training be voluntary or compulsory bearing in mind that Governors are voluntary and unpaid.

Selection/Election of Governing Bodies

At present Community Schools have Local Authority, Parent, Community and staff (including the Headteacher) Governors. Parent Governors are elected by parents of pupils, Community Governors are elected by the Governing Body, and Staff Governors are elected by members of staff. Voluntary Aided, Foundation and Trust schools and Academies can appoint the majority of their Governors. The regulations regarding the composition of governing bodies are complex.

Would you like to see any changes to the current position? In particular should the Community rather than the Governing Body elect Community Governors? And if so how?

Should we give much more freedom to Governing Bodies to determine the composition of their Governing Bodies with two provisos that no category should have an overall majority and that all categories must be included?

Should all or some categories have to be approved before standing as Governors? To what extent should a skills audit determine how Governors are elected/selected?

Training in School Governance of Headteachers and Senior School Managers

At present there is little or no training in the role of School Governance during teacher training and insufficient in Headteacher training. This leaves many otherwise highly effective senior teachers seriously lacking in their understanding of School Governance.

How do we ensure that these senior people have a basic understanding of School Governance so that they know how to become involved in working with Governing Bodies, and in particular the role of the Headteacher as Governor?

Liberal Democrats in Government

Sarah Teather

It's a real privilege to be writing this article as the Liberal Democrat Minister for Children and Families in the Coalition Government.

I came into politics to make a difference for the most disadvantaged in our society, and as well as representing my own constituents, I now have the opportunity to change the lives of children and families across the country. There is no doubt that these are difficult times to be in Government. The financial legacy left by Labour means that we will simply not be able to afford to do all the things we would like to do. But I am clear, by being in Government and working hard, the Liberal Democrats can make a real difference.

The Pupil Premium is our flagship education policy – and it's all about changing the system so that limited resources really benefit the most disadvantaged. From next September, schools taking disadvantaged children will get the additional money they need to provide them with the extra support they deserve, no matter where they are in the country. This could mean more individual tuition or catch-up classes, but it will be for the school to decide, the Government won't be telling headteachers how to spend the money.

This is a real Liberal Democrat achievement. It was the centrepiece of our education policy during the election campaign, and it is now being implemented in Government. While the Conservatives had a similar policy, it was the Liberal Democrats who pushed for it to be funded from outside the schools budget, and for it to feature specifically in the coalition agreement. And it's no secret that it was one of the sticking points of the negotiations with Labour after the General Election – they simply refused to agree to it. I find this shocking – a policy designed to support the most vulnerable in our society and give them the chances that other children have – rejected by the Labour Party. If any of us ever needed another example of Labour's complete failure to represent the most poor, and the emptiness of their rhetoric, this is it. Make no mistake, it is the Liberal Democrats who are now the party for the most disadvantaged, championing policies like the Pupil Premium in opposition, placing them at the heart of our manifesto, and making them happen in Government.

The same desire to give every single child a fair start underpins the Liberal Democrats' commitment to high quality early years education. So I'm leading reforms to Sure Start and nursery provision - working out how we can really get the best value out of our Children's Centres, and how they can reach the families who need it most – families who are isolated, struggling with poor health or disability, or who find it hard to be part of their community. The evidence is clear - if we can make a difference for these families before they start school, they'll be more likely to succeed in school and beyond.

I've been hugely supported by the wealth of expertise within the Liberal Democrat party on education and children's issues, many of whom are members of LDEA. Richard Kemp, James Kempton and many others have contributed to my thinking and helped me find Liberal Democrats who can give me practical advice from years of experience. And CentreForum's work, for example, has been informing my thinking on how to give the parents of children with special educational needs more confidence that their child will get the right support, in a school that really meets their needs, without putting pressure on councils' already tight budgets. These thoughts will go into a Green Paper later in the autumn.

I've also really appreciated the expertise and help of colleagues in the House of Lords. Baroness Walmsley has already written about how, by working together with colleagues across the coalition government, Liberal Democrat peers secured changes to the Academies Bill that protected the most vulnerable, and ensured local community involvement.

I know the Academies Bill was controversial, and that “free schools” are controversial too. I supported the policies we agreed in “Equity and Excellence” to give schools more autonomy and freedom to innovate, and parents real choice in choosing the right education for their child. And I support the ability of local communities to make the best decisions about how to deliver the best education for every child in their area. Obviously, if the Liberal Democrats had been in government alone our legislation would have been different. But we are in coalition. The Academies Bill was in the Coalition Agreement between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives and is part of the Government’s policy programme. The Academies Bill is a flagship Conservative policy and the Pupil Premium is a flagship Liberal Democrat policy.

It is over three years since I, as Liberal Democrat education spokesperson, championed the Pupil Premium as our flagship education policy and debated it at Conference. I never dared imagine a time when I would be unveiling it as Government policy and then actually implementing it. But that’s what’s now happening, and it’s a privilege to be playing my part in it.

Sarah Teather is MP for Brent Central and Liberal Democrat Minister for Children and Families in the Department for Education

Achievements and possibilities

Dan Rogerson

The creation of the new parliamentary committees is a real chance to inform and contribute to government policy as well as scrutinise it. As we head towards the first Party Conference since forming our Coalition Government, it is an ideal time to reflect on what has already been achieved in a very short time and look ahead to the challenges and mammoth amount of work we need to undertake.

My motivation as a Liberal Democrat backbencher and Co-Chair (along with Baroness Walmsley) of the Committee for Education, Children and Young People is to retain our identity, hold to account as well as feed into current policy and use the coalition agreement as a firm and positive foundation upon which to build.

One of these achievements is the introduction of a Pupil Premium. This is one of the four main policies upon which our manifesto was predicated and is a tenet of Liberal Democrat thinking and motivation – to help the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children in our schools. This will be funded from outside the schools budget – a point which clearly identifies this as a Liberal Democrat policy differentiating it from the Premium outlined in the Conservative party manifesto.

The recent Academies Act is an example of the way in which we see the newly established backbench parliamentary committee working and having a significant part to play in what ends up on the statute book. During the Bill’s passage through the Commons and following up on the excellent work undertaken by my colleagues in the Lords (which prompted Michael Gove to admit that the Bill was all the better for the changes made there), I met with both Nick Gibb and Sarah Teather and discussed several concerns with them. The concessions resulting from these meetings included a safeguard against funding being taken from other maintained schools in an area, a duty for any new school to promote community cohesion and, following amendments put down by me and Bob Russell MP, the Minister clarified in the chamber that the governing body of any academy must have at least two parent governors. This last point is one which many MPs, stakeholders and constituents had expressed concerns about amid fears that parents would not be adequately represented in the process. The Lords achieved a duty to consult about conversion to an

academy, Parliamentary accountability for the academy programme, a duty on the Secretary of State to consider the impact on other schools of any conversion and parity on SEN for academies and other schools.

Whilst extending the Academies programme was not a Lib Dem priority, this piece of legislation is an example of the way of working we all must adopt in order to make this new type of politics work. By their very nature coalitions are about compromise and collaboration. I believe very firmly in what this Government has delivered and what it will continue to deliver. Part of this process involves adjustment, discussion and working together in order to move forward on each issue.

Looking ahead to the Education and Children's Bill (which is where the Pupil Premium will be introduced), my colleagues and I will be looking to see more of our aspirations for the state of education in this country realised. Setting teachers and schools free from overbearing central Government control and an overly prescriptive curriculum has and will continue to be a priority for Liberal Democrats and one which now we have a real chance to push forward.

Dan Rogerson is MP for North Cornwall and Co-Chair of the Education, Families and Young People Back-Bench Committee

A fair education system?

John Howson

Unlike previous booklets, this edition, published for the Liverpool Autumn 2010 Conference, marks a new period in history: it is the first since Liberal Democrats entered on the business of government. With that new role comes a new responsibility. For the freedom of opposition must be tempered with the realism of government. However, to govern, or even to have but a hand upon the tiller of government, is not to abrogate all one's values, parking them in some distant vault like ministerial share portfolios, until the safe haven of opposition allows them to be returned to centre-stage untrammelled by the buffeting of the real world. Rather it is to ensure that core values identify and underpin the direction of government and, in our case, its education policy.

We are lucky that, in the Coalition Agreement, we have a blueprint for schools, and the school system. Within the overarching principles of Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility, we have subscribed both to tackle education inequality, and to give greater powers to parents and pupils to choose a good school. We have accepted the belief that the State should help new groups, including parents come together to try to improve the education system by starting new schools. Within this structure we will fund a significant premium for disadvantaged pupils from outside the schools budget.

But, good intentions are not enough. The first 150 schools to seek a new status under the Coalition are heavily weighted towards the Home Counties, contain few schools with above average numbers of pupils with special educational needs, and many secondary schools with impressive records of pupil progress into higher education. What sort of educational inequality are these schools representative of? And why, in an age of austerity, should time and effort be wasted upon structural change for existing schools when there are so many more exciting challenges awaiting a new government? The Academy Act may be law, but it is not a Funding Agreement that should hold up the creation of the first coalition academies, it is rather a need for each school that applies to demonstrate how it will tackle education inequality. For Freedom, unaccompanied by Fairness and Responsibility, cannot pass the coalition test. And no school can be allowed to opt-out of the drive to reduce inequality.

The same test must also apply to new schools. The school system in England has always been pluralistic in nature, and must remain so, but new entrants cannot create a system that is demonstrably less fair than at present, and must accept a responsibility to work together as part of a system. Not to do so would be merely to establish new private schools funded through taxation. This would be a move that would open the way to vouchers for all, paid for by the taxes of the poor. Mrs. Thatcher's government was wise enough to temper parental choice with recognition that the State cannot always offer everything its citizens' desire. New schools cannot be 'prejudicial to the efficient use of resources', especially in this age of austerity. For this reason alone, there can be few new secondary schools, although the idea of technical academies is worth considering further. In the primary and early years sectors, new schools that lead to increased social and other forms of segregation cannot be tolerated, however they are disguised.

How the Education Department reconciles the differing values of its two coalition partners is not for me to decide, but Liberal Democrats, for whom education is a key reason that many are members of the Party, could not accept a schooling system that reflected only the vision of one partner in government, was increasingly unfair for many in society, and manifestly irresponsible in a time of financial restraint. Too much time has already been wasted debating structures. Ahead of the spending review, all hands must be bound to the task of creating a fairer education system for all, whether children of parents seeking their own school, or refugees with no knowledge of the English education system, or indeed any child anywhere. For that's the difference between opposition and government. A government, even a coalition, is for the many, and not just the few, for the future as well as the present, and must have a sense of knowing that what it starts others will take forward.

Professor John Howson is President of the Liberal Democrat Education Association and a former teacher, academic and commentator on the education scene

How free? How independent?

Joan Walmsley

No, I'm not talking about the party but about academies! If we're going to criticise, let's at least get our facts right. The teaching unions are claiming that the new academies programme is the greatest privatisation of our school system ever seen. Well let's examine that. A private school is one which you pay to attend. It is not funded by the state but by pupil fees and, in some cases, charitable foundations. However, pupils don't pay to attend academies and every single penny of the school's income comes from the state. In addition the pupil intake comes wholly or mainly from the area in which the school is located, not from anywhere in the country or abroad. I'm not sure what that is but it's certainly not private education.

So these are not independent schools. Indeed, they are more dependent on the Secretary of State for Education than any maintained school ever was on its own Local Authority. Under Labour the academies had a seven year funding agreement, and some of the new ones will have that too. However, the new "free schools", i.e. the new academies set up by groups of parents or teachers, may have a much shorter contract - less security not more. This is in case everything goes pear-shaped so the Secretary of State can step in and close it down. Indeed, that's not all the SoS can do. He can lay down all sorts of conditions in the Funding Agreement and change them if he wants to. That's control! These schools are not only NOT going to be independent, they're NOT going to be free either.

What are the freedoms? Those that are left (after the Lib Dems managed to get rid of some of them during the course of the Bill) are the freedom to change the curriculum and not to have to adhere to the staff pay

and conditions framework. Oh yes, and the right to cut loose from the local authority and buy certain services elsewhere, for which they will get some extra money. Even then there are limitations. The curriculum has to be “balanced and broadly based”. I’m sure Ofsted (and the parents) will have something to say if it isn’t. And the curriculum is more controlled by the demands of the universities and the offerings of the exam boards than anyone else.

Yes, they can pay teachers more to attract the best and there are dangers in that. However, schools have been finding ways WITHIN the framework of paying teachers more to attract or keep them for years, so it’s nothing new. What about the extra money and the powers and duties of the Local Authorities? Well, the small percentage of schools that have pursued their initial “expression of interest” or what I would call “wanting to know a little more” – about 1 in 10 - indicates that most don’t believe the extra funding is enough to cover what the Local Authority provided before.

I believe that schools that are happy with their Local Authority are less likely to want to leave them. That presents a challenge to Local Authorities. Under the old regime it was clear that, if you wanted a new school building, the only game in town was to have an academy. The Labour Government denied this but everyone knows it was true. So, wise Lib Dem authorities decided to get involved. Some of them became joint sponsors of the academies in their area, a very good way to keep an eye on things and have an influence. Now, thanks to the economic mess Labour has left us in, there are not likely to be many shiny new school buildings around for the next few years, so that attraction is out of the window. However, if some of your schools decide they want to opt out of your so-called “control”, my advice would be to get stuck in. Offer to be a sponsor or co-sponsor! Get as involved as you can on the principle that, if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. Everyone knows that LAs have not controlled schools for a long time anyway, but they do still have duties relating to challenge and school improvement, special needs and transport. The issue that I find most unclear is that of challenge. What happens to the school improvement agenda if a lot of schools become academies and Ofsted doesn’t inspect them very often? We will have to wait and see.

The Lib Dems did not initiate this legislation. Our Conservative partners know that, if this had been a solely Lib Dem Government, the first thing we would have done for education would not have been a potentially major structural change. We would have given priority to the forthcoming Pupil Premium. It is not structures that improve schools but good teaching and leadership. However, we have to make it work for the sake of the children.

So, let’s exert as much local influence as we can, in the consultation prior to any of our schools becoming academies and in the shape of the school if the change goes ahead. It has to be a decision for the school and, after all, that’s a very local decision. If they decide it is right for them and they go ahead, we still have a duty to help and support them as much as we can. Sulking won’t help.

Baroness Joan Walmsley is a Liberal Democrat peer in the House of Lords, and Co-Chair of the Education, Families and Young People Back-Bench Committee

The challenge of providing school places – getting more difficult?

Peter Downes

Ensuring that there are enough school places for the children and young people in a given area is one of the basic responsibilities of a civilised state. School places should, ideally, be as close to home as possible to

reduce the need to travel. They should be in buildings fit for purpose. The schools should be good enough for parents to have confidence in them. School management and governance should ensure that teachers and assistants are happy working there.

In many parts of the country, a significant under-estimate of the number of places required for primary school children over the next three years is causing real concern to councillors and education officers. Demographic forecasting, never an exact science, seems to have got more complex as the patterns of reproduction change. The inconsistent picture makes it more complicated. In many areas rolls are stable or declining. Elsewhere there are several hundred places short and councils are making contingency plans, putting mobile classrooms on playgrounds, a throwback to the 1960s.

The problems are exacerbated by the shortage of capital funding needed for this work. The government's capital grants for 'basic need' are insufficient. Councils are scrapping their existing plans for capital improvements to scrape together enough money to fund the places required. The loss of capital improvements is a bitter disappointment for Governing Bodies which have been working hard to support their Headteachers in bidding for capital funding. As the furor over the cancellation of many of the BSF projects has shown, losing new school buildings you have been planning is very demoralising.

The threat to sensible management of the provision of school places has increased as a result of the measures taken by the new coalition government. The most worrying proposal is their intention to encourage groups of parents, faith organisations, charities and private companies to set up their own schools. These schools will be directly funded by the state, outside Local Authority control, be released from the national curriculum and can vary the terms and conditions of employees. It is, in essence, the application to education of the crudest principles of the market-place. Driven by popular demand, 'good schools' will be generated, will thrive and grow and the failing schools will wither and eventually close.

My concerns about Gove's vision are fourfold.

- **Administrative complexity** The prospect of parents 'shopping around' for the best place for their children is a nightmare. Finding places and transferring from one phase to another is already bad enough. An educational free-for-all would be even worse. Secondary schools already take in pupils from a wide range of primary schools. An increase in the range makes it harder for the receiving secondary school to give the pastoral support needed to make the transition from KS2 to KS3 as painless as possible. The curriculum gurus talk about a 'seamless transition' from KS2 to KS3, but the more complex the process, the less likely this is to happen. Complexity is costly, in terms of parental time, school administration and whatever is left of the Local Authority.
- **Logistical impracticality** Opening a new school draws on the skills of many professionals and takes a massive amount of time. If a group of year 7 parents decided that they wanted to create a new school for their children, the pupils would probably be embarking on their GCSE courses before the new school was opened. Unless, of course, the parents buy up a disused warehouse, factory, office-block or Woolworths store and convert it. Most parents have to work to earn a living and have not got the time, let alone the expertise, to bring about a complex development. Committed parents have always been willing to help existing schools but as for setting up new schools *ab initio*, it is logistically impractical. Companies are waiting in the wings to provide these services, but at a price which the impoverished country cannot afford.
- **Social divisiveness** Who, precisely, is going to decide which pupils will attend these new schools? They are to be 'non-selective' but presumably the parents or others who have set them up want particular children to go there so they will find some way of selecting them. Schools set up by faith groups, cooperatives 'and others' will be socially divisive, leading to further fragmentation of a society already in danger of losing its social cohesion. The children left behind in failing schools will

suffer irreparably because schools don't die overnight, they fail over a period which might cover an individual pupil's entire career in the school. The gap between the most successful and the least successful, already one of the worst in the developed world, will get wider.

- **Financial inefficiency** Gove says '*parents want smaller schools and smaller classes*'. These are desirable but expensive. Small schools have a higher unit cost than larger schools. The period of relative financial improvement over the last ten years cannot continue, given the constraints on the government's resources. 'Choice' implies spare capacity and spare capacity is extremely expensive. Even if the Gove aims were desirable, they are unaffordable.

Speaking in November, 2009, Michael Gove stated his intention to 'transform state education in this country, **irreversibly**, for the better'. For the better? I doubt it. If the provision of school places depends on the whims and fashions of the market-place and on an uncoordinated range of providers, each with their own agendas, it could be disastrous, especially for the most vulnerable.

Peter Downes is a County Councillor in Cambridgeshire, where he is Liberal Democrat Deputy Group Leader

A view from the Local Government Association

David Bellotti

In July the Children and Young People Board at the Local Government Association held a meeting with Ministers from the Department for Education. After too many years of meeting Conservative and Labour Ministers it was very refreshing to meet our own Sarah Teather, along with Tim Loughton from the Conservatives.

We discussed Special Education Needs and in particular how important it was that the Coalition Government ensured that those children with special needs would be offered the best. We emphasised that the success of this will be the Pupil Premium, its size and how it is used. It is going to be important that it's not just the Local Authority catering for special needs pupils, but every school. It is also important that councils are not just left working with schools in areas no one else will work in.

Another issue discussed was Safeguarding Children. We are worried about rising demand, in the wake of the children across the whole country suffering at the hands of their carers. Rising demand raises at least two major concerns. First, the resources needed to meet the demand. Second, whether this leads to children being removed from their carers without good cause. We also raised serious concerns about inspections. We had Ofsted giving three stars to Haringey for their Children's Services just before Baby P. We had the Audit Commission raising value for money issues where clearly money needs to be spent. Since our meeting we have had the announcement of the change in Ofsted inspections and the abolition of the Audit Commission so I was glad I raised those issues!!

Tackling Child Poverty was agreed as a very important policy moving forward and we discussed how the Coalition Government and Council's could work together to achieve the targets we had set ourselves. There is a determination to succeed as we all know that the poverty gap has been widening under previous governments for a long time. We agreed that in reducing public expenditure it would be important that this gap did not get bigger. Confirmation was given that Sure Start Centres would continue to receive funding. I congratulated the Government on increasing the number of health visitors as this is the key to referring families to the Sure Start Centres. This enables those families in need to get help right from the birth of their

child. Labour had cut the number of health visitors and the increase was in the Conservative Manifesto, which I happily acknowledge. Some Sure Start centres (including the one in my ward) had started to fill up places with middle class families so I was pleased that Sarah Teather said in future this work would be more targeted.

We told the Ministers that Councillors have been pleased to see the Coalition Government abolish a lot of education quangos. We would like to see more abolished. We are working to substantially reduce the Young People's Learning Agency (it partly replaced the Learning and Skills Council). In tackling the bureaucracy set up by Labour we hope to keep as much money as we can for front line education, properly targeted.

Michael Gove has already visited our Liberal Democrat Local Government Conference and spoken at the national all party Local Government Conference. Along with our more detailed work with Ministers we feel at last there is a listening Department for Education willing to work with us.

David Bellotti is a Councillor in Bath and North East Somerset. He is Liberal Democrat lead for Children and Young People at the Local Government Association

News from Oxfordshire

Jean Fooks

Concern about academies

Oxford West and Abingdon constituency party held a discussion evening in July, at which John Howson and Anthony Bowen were joined by Evan Harris to lead discussion on the Academies Bill and LibDem priorities for education. While it was recognised that peers were working on amendments to improve the Bill, members were concerned at the intentions to set up more academies with possible ill-effects on Local Authority provision of support services across the remaining authority schools. A brief message was agreed for immediate submission to Sarah Teather:

"We, as residents and LibDem members and supporters in Oxford West and Abingdon constituency, are disturbed at the implications of the Academies Bill currently before parliament. We feel that the Liberal Democrats' key education policy of Pupil Premiums, with funding coming from outside the education budget, to provide extra funds for disadvantaged children, is at risk from the rush to encourage schools to adopt academy status, without any clear guidance on the funding arrangements. Our residents want a good local school for their children, at primary and secondary level, with support for all pupils to achieve their full potential. They do not want artificial admission schemes that place children away from their neighbourhoods. The importance of early intervention to support disadvantaged children was strongly supported."

In Oxfordshire at present, we have two existing academies and one school, whose results have been particularly poor, being proposed for academy status under the old Labour terms. This latest proposal from the Conservative administration is opposed by Labour and LibDem members – but is being pushed through by the Cabinet despite pleas for reconsideration to allow time to consider a more collaborative solution to the poor attainment in that part of Oxford. Some Cabinet members commented on the need for competition between schools, as is the norm between businesses... LibDems have called the decision to proceed in to the Scrutiny Committee, but given the Tory majority there it is unlikely that the decision will be reconsidered.

Work of the Oxfordshire Pre-court and Prevention Team

The Oxfordshire Pre-Court and Prevention Team have continued to achieve excellent reductions in offending and re-offending by young people. I give a few quotes from their recent Team report:

“From September 2008, youth work, youth justice and Connexions services were brought together to form an Integrated Youth Support Service (IYSS) as part of Oxfordshire County Council’s (OCC) restructuring of Children’s Services. The aim of this change was to deliver joined up services at a local level, to be able to intervene early and to be more accessible to children, young people and their families.”

“The original target of the team was to reduce the number of first time entrants to the criminal justice system aged 10-17 by 12% from 2006 to 2009. The actual reduction was 57% - and in the year 2009/10 a further 48% reduction was achieved, with only 272 new entrants that year. One key scheme is the Identification and Support Scheme, covering work with young people aged 8-14 who are at risk of offending as identified by a range of risk factors such as having siblings/ parents who are engaged in offending behaviour; high levels of school exclusion or high offending peer group etc.”

The Conservative administration is now proposing making huge cuts in the budget – another 10% reduction on top of an already planned 10%, i.e. a £200m target now over 4 years. Liberal Democrats have already flagged up their opposition to cuts in youth work and we shall continue to fight short-sighted cuts in preventative work like that of the Pre-Court and Prevention Team.

Jean Fooks is a County Councillor in Oxfordshire

Attainment rises in Sheffield

Andrew Sangar

August 2010 saw a further 5% rise in Sheffield’s GCSE results (A* - C including English and maths) on top of last year’s record gains. These excellent results for our young people were matched by similar rises in results at foundation level, and Key Stages 1 and 2.

I am confident that Sheffield has turned the corner and that more Sheffield children and young people are reaching their potential. I hope the days of low attainment and being in Whitehall’s firing line are behind us. The last two years, since the Liberal Democrats took majority control of Sheffield city council, have seen major progress and I trust that this good work will not be undone by the actions of the Coalition Government.

When I took over as Executive Member I found a situation where schools had a low regard for the Local Authority. Whether a school was doing well was often down to their own leadership, and many head teachers didn’t believe the Authority could help them. I was shocked at the inconsistencies between schools in approaches to pupil tracking as well as the low levels of expectation. In my opinion these had contributed to years of underachievement (a stubborn 7% gap between the English average performance and the Sheffield average at every point measured between 7 and 16 years of age) and I had inherited a situation where DCSF (as it then was) were only weeks away from taking the schools advisory service away from the council.

Our raising attainment and aspiration strategy had three elements: get every school as good as it could be through robust challenge of their leadership, get the whole of the city united in the importance that every child should have the opportunity to reach their potential, and that raising aspiration needed to be constantly reinforced for every child in every neighbourhood.

Sheffield recruited a pool of twenty lead headteachers who were deployed to primary schools as needed. The money for these was found from outside the schools delegated fund. Sometimes these would work alongside

the existing heads, more often they were used to provide the change required when a head teacher left. In my opinion this 'shock therapy' has worked, Key Stage 2 results and Ofsted inspections confirm that more of our primary schools are providing a good education for their children.

Sheffield had 10 Secondary schools in national challenge, below the 30% of students achieving 5A*-C benchmark. Two of these were already academies. I found working with their sponsor, ULT, very challenging, and the false start of their first executive head coupled with ULT's centralised way of working made progress slow. We took the decision to consult to close another secondary school, as this school was the least popular school with parents in each catchment area and its attainment was judged least likely to improve. This school will now close in July 2011. This year 22.4% of its students reached achieved 5 A*-C, easily the lowest figure in Sheffield. The Local Authority has supported a further three secondary schools to be part of a national challenge trust, as well as supporting two other schools through Interim Executive Boards (i.e. replacing the whole governing body) after poor Ofsted inspections.

What does the future hold?

Local Authorities need to be able to challenge schools to improve the attainment of their pupils. When headteachers and governing bodies need a kick, there needs to be somebody closer than Whitehall to administer the shock, and then to support the transformation required. From Sheffield's experiences academies have been hugely expensive and difficult to work with. If an academy fails how does the Local Authority pick up the pieces? Free schools will do nothing for maintaining a comprehensive intake in an area. In my opinion they are inefficient, divisive, and poorly thought out – I'm glad we've got none on the horizon.

Sheffield's model of school improvement has benefitted from lots of wrap around support services, breakfast clubs, study support, and multiagency support teams. How will we sustain these services that are helping to deliver the improvement in a world of much lower council spending? I hope that the Pupil Premium will help us continue to develop these services.

The challenges for education attainment in Sheffield remain. For too many of our young people education attainment is determined by the attainment and aspiration of their parents. In two years we've improved the situation, largely eliminating the gap between Sheffield's average attainment and the national average. However, there is much still to do if we are to ensure every Sheffield child reaches their potential.

Andrew Sangar is a Councillor on Sheffield City Council. He was the executive member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning from 2008 to 2010

Involving children in the Council's work: action in York

Carol Runciman

A small group of us here in York have been rewriting our 'Involvement' strategy. Officers, partners (such as the police and health services) and myself, as Lead Member, wanted to make sure we were on the right track. We are all committed to making sure that children and young people in the city are – as far as possible – involved in what happens, especially if it is something for them and also that their voices are heard in the process of decision making.

We started off by stating our vision. Basically, this has four themes

- making sure we are all committed to involvement and share the same values,
- ensuring that strategies, structures and systems reflect this,
- making sure that we celebrate high quality work and challenge anything that needs improving, and
- making sure our workforce has the skills and knowledge to support these aims.

We then looked at why we want to involve children and we are clear that we will support Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This establishes a fundamental set of rights for children and young people to express their views and opinions about decisions that affect them and for those views to be taken into account. Our Children and Young People’s Plan for 2009 to 2012 states that involvement should be one of our main underpinning principles. We all want to make sure that our children and young people and their families help to design and deliver services and that they know when something is good and so worth celebrating.

We looked at the Coalition’s aspirations for a Big Society, which can be summed up as *“giving citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want.”* We feel our strategy supports this ambition. We also have a well developed Play Strategy and in that we say that we will make *‘listening to children and young people common place throughout the authority: so that children’s views on play are explicitly acknowledged and reflected in all relevant plans’.*

The group was very interested to consider the work of Roger Hart, UNICEF. He has established a hierarchy of involvement – starting from manipulation and using young people as what he describes as ‘decoration’, to involvement that is thorough and in depth, making a real difference to the lives of children, young people and their families. (*“Children’s Participation: from tokenism to citizenship” by Roger Hart, UNICEF 1992*). We will be asking our partner organisations to take an honest look at the way young people are involved in the work that they do and score themselves against Roger Hart’s descriptors. His ladder of involvement is as follows.

8	Child, young person or family initiated, shared decisions with practitioners	Children, young people and families have the ideas, set up the project and invite practitioners to join them in making decisions.
7	Child, young person or family initiated and directed	Child, young person and families have the initial idea and decide how the project is to be carried out. Practitioners are available to help but do not take charge.
6	Practitioner initiated, shared decisions with children, young people or families.	Practitioners have the original idea but children, young people and families are involved in every step of planning and implementation.
5	Children, young people or families consulted and informed.	The project is designed and run by practitioners but children, young people and families are consulted. They have a full understanding of the process and their views are considered.
4	Children, young people or families assigned but not informed.	Practitioners decide on the project and children, young people or families volunteer for it. Practitioners respect their views.
3	Tokenism	Children, young people and families are asked to say what they think about an issue but have little choice about the way they express those views.
2	Decoration	Children, young people and families take part in an event but do

		not understand the issues.
1`	Manipulation	Children, young people and families do what practitioners suggest they do but have no real understanding of the issues.

We already have a lot of groups which allow children’s voices to be heard. They range from the Schools’ Councils, who hold two city centre get-togethers a year, organised by them, to the more specialist groups, such as those for children in care, ‘Tell Me That I Matter’ for older children and ‘I Matter Too’ for the younger ones. We have a City of York Youth Council and a Member of the UK Youth Parliament, who are all well able to comment on matters from a young person’s point of view. They attend our Young People’s Working Group, which is part of the council’s structure and so attended by members from all parties. We also have our Young Inspectors, who are busy inspecting youth facilities this summer, a feedback section on our YorOK website and trained young people involved in recruitment. We have several groups which involve young people with disabilities, some of whom assist professionals in finding new and varied ways of communicating with them.

As a group, we will be monitoring the progress of the strategy and our Children’s Trust Board – the YorOK Board - will have regular updates. We hope to compile case studies of specific, successful projects to disseminate more widely at a later date.

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

Youth services under threat (again): the view from West Sussex

Colin Wilsdon

The Liberal Democrat Manifesto contained the paragraph

Strengthen the Youth Service by making it a statutory service, and by encouraging local authorities to provide youth services in partnership with young people and the voluntary sector

Youth services are vulnerable to budget cuts just because they are not statutory and “we can”. That applies in Liberal Democrat controlled councils as well as others. To be clear some aspects of youth provision are already statutory, for example the Youth Offending Service and Connexions and the requirement to consult young people on the services that are available to them. What is not statutory is the requirement to provide youth centres staffed by professional youth workers. The manifesto pledge was welcome but has not translated itself to the Coalition Agreement. Encouragement for Local Authorities to work in partnership with the voluntary sector is a noble aspiration. Many do so already. But in the present financial climate this could be viewed as a cost saving measure rather than being desirable in its own right and if it is a cost saving measure then it is likely that the resources needed to support and work with the voluntary sector will not be in place.

Conservative controlled West Sussex County Council is going through this process right now. Last February £2m was taken out of the £12m Youth Services budget. The cut was linked to an on-going efficiency review rather than anything to do with national debt reduction so there could be more cuts to follow. The Lib Dem group, sensing the damage that would be done to already poorly funded youth services, put up a reasoned amendment that would have restored the funding in a credible way but was predictably over-ruled by the Tory majority. Since then the Youth Service have been given a slight reprieve in that only £1.1m will be cut in this financial year but the time-scale is so short that it will be very difficult to avoid serious damage.

The game plan is to focus Local Authority youth workers on areas and groups of high need and to rely on the voluntary sector to provide the untargeted universal service for the whole age group. Training it is suggested will be offered to voluntary groups to ensure standards are maintained.

In one sense working with the voluntary sector could be seen as being in tune with our manifesto pledge. But there is a crucial difference. To make it work time is needed to locate the voluntary groups, time and money are required to develop and train them and professional youth workers are needed to offer on-going support. Making changes in quick measure, half-way through a financial year, as in West Sussex, is not calculated to do this. In particular it is not clear that voluntary groups are out there anxious to take on the universal service and this could determine what happens in particular areas. To cap it all grants to voluntary groups in West Sussex are to be cut as well, though a national £3.8m fund for workforce training that starts in September could help.

And what of the young people themselves? Following the budget decision in February, there was some quite thorough consultation with young people and other 'stakeholders' about the sort of youth service they wanted - disingenuously really in view of the pre-formed ideas that already existed. Interestingly whilst the idea of prioritising those in need was supported, young people reported good relations with their youth workers and wanted the retention of youth centres run by professionals - now under severe threat.

Finally the sixty four thousand dollar question: do we need a universal youth service anyway? All young people need support and encouragement as they move to adulthood. A youth service that is only targeted on those with problems is focusing on cure rather than prevention - in the words of today's financial world, not good value for money.

Colin Wilsdon is a Councillor on West Sussex County Council and Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on Children and Young People's Services

Some thoughts about education policy

Derek Mann

All our policies should be distinctively liberal, and that is especially true when formulating education policies. Most thinking on education seems to be centred around what is the current practice and methods. A mind set has developed around buildings and methods which were put in place because it was decided that young people had to be regimented throughout their teenage years, and schools were the place to do it.

This thinking has extended to very early years, when tiny tots are now expected to jump through educational hoops. Statistics are manipulated to try to prove that year on year the nations's young people are better educated than any in the past, and we should rejoice at the prospect! The fact that anyone who tries to employ many young people and finds them lacking in many of the basics is disregarded. Yet even our Prime

minister is reported to be unhappy that it will be difficult to find a good secondary school for his five-year-old. What? After six years of Coalition Government there will not have been radical improvement?

So what should WE think about? Let's start with the start, i.e. the children, and childhood. Six is the time to begin infant education formally, not four, or even two or three. "How can we organise our lives, our careers?", I hear mums cry. Sorry, that's your problem, not the infant's! However, employers and governments should be able to help.

Four years at this level, when a decent handling of the basics of learning are obtained could be followed by a further four years of developed understanding, leading to a leaving certificate which places an individual somewhere on a normal distribution curve which is validated only, say, every ten years. Funding for these eight years is by government, which guarantees that all children will be in classes of not more than twenty for all of those years.

Then there would be four years where each individual has a fund of money to use as they think fit – education, training, subsidised voluntary work, apprenticeships etc. This fund has to be used between 14 and 18. At 18 another government fund is available to everyone for four years to pay for university tuition or similar schemes of training or work. This fund does not have to be used within four years but can be carried forward for retraining or relearning later in life. Financial power has been given to individuals at 14, then at 18, again with some financial independence, they can make realistic choices depending on those made earlier.

Choice, Fairness, Opportunity, Assistance have to be our guiding principles in all matters.

Derek Mann is a retired teacher

Playing for a better future

Floella Benjamin

I strongly believe play helps children develop a stimulating relationship that enables them to express, explore and in some cases make sense of their difficult and painful experiences. It helps children with conduct disorder find healthier ways of communicating, develop fulfilling relationships, increase resiliency and facilitate emotional literacy. Children use play as a form of communication; often they use play when they do not have the words to describe their thoughts as well as feelings and perceptions of their internal and external world. So play is an effective way to help children modify their behaviour, clarify their self-concept and build healthy relationships.

Learning through play, in all its forms, is a universally accepted concept. Children, especially pre-schoolers, learn how the world works by playing and experimenting with words, sounds, music, objects, shapes, colours and materials.

When I was a little girl in Trinidad each night before my brothers and sisters and I went to bed my dad would tell us Anansi stories and we would have to dress up and perform like our favourite movie stars. When we had visitors my mother would always make me do a dance or recite a poem. So throughout my four decades in showbusiness those foundation years have stood me in good stead. I have performed in stage and television dramas, West End musicals, films and of course as a children's TV presenter.

The programme I am most associated with is the legendary Playschool, which if you think about it was an Arts programme for tiny tots! It had music, song, dance, stories, and of course painting, sculpture and mime, it was about learning through play. Each time I took the children through the..... 'Round, Square or Arched Window' I would sing them songs tell them stories, paint pictures or mime, being anything from a kangaroo to a table. Oh what fun and joy!

Children are of course like tiny sponges, soaking up everything around them, good and bad. The more we stimulate their senses from a very early age the more confident adults they will turn out to be. Early experience with colours, shapes, tactile materials such as clay and plasticine are vital in their understanding of how things work on a physical level. So too are music, rhymes and storytelling which develop verbal confidence, memory and cognitive skills. All pretty obvious stuff, but so easily pushed to one side by the ever increasing need for ever younger children to reach academic standards necessary to climb the educational ladder in today's highly competitive world. In a society where nursery age children are now being excluded for behavioural issues, there is clearly a huge need for therapeutic play intervention before those children continue through society.

Having said that, disdain for artistic creativity is not a new thing. My husband went to school fifty years ago in the industrial north of England, where the career choices were few. "Pit or Mill?" the careers officer would ask. From an early age my husband loved playing with paints and showed great promise as an artist, but that was never encouraged. No praise was bestowed upon him and his talent was stifled. At the age of eight he painted a portrait of his teacher that was such a good likeness that he was accused of getting a grown up to do it for him!

In those days the 3Rs were paramount and anyone with artistic flair was dismissed with phrases like, "He's not very bright, but he's good with his hands". If anyone showed artistic flair or ability they were considered backward and odd. Thankfully now many teachers do recognise the importance of art in a young person's development, starting, as I said, from pre-school right through to university. The use of drama, another form of play, is a vital tool in developing confidence and speaking skills, which will eventually prove invaluable in whatever career a young person chooses to pursue. Music and dance too are great confidence builders and are also essential in allowing young people to express their emotions and ideas.

I recently judged a global painting competition, and the shortlisted children's paintings were exhibited at the Tate Modern. The works came from as far afield as China, Turkey and Ghana but they all had one thing in common, the ability and talent to communicate emotions through visual art. I can always tell from a painting whether a child is happy or suffering from depression, confident or introverted, have low self esteem or feel like a soaring bird. But the creative attributes of children are still not given the same importance or status as academic qualities even today. In schools if you are a skilled dancer or singer you are less thought of than if you are a maths genius or scientist.

Play helps with creative thinking which is needed more than ever in today's technological world where more and more we are required to think in straight lines, inside the box, unemotionally without passion, feeling joy or morality. We need more artistic and creative thinkers within large companies, because they will always think of different ways of doing things which I believe in turn will make people feel happy, and happiness is so lacking in people's lives these days.

So we must strive harder than ever to unlock and unleash the creative potential in the minds of our children and teach them to use it to heal our wounded world. To think outside the box, differently, creatively, to develop an analytic mind and the ability to express themselves without inhibition.

Everyone has the ability to express themselves artistically, be it in song, dance, poetry, paint or prose. All we have to do is give each and every child the opportunity to experience the joy of creativity and artistic expression, the earlier we start through play the better. Not all children will go on to be great composers,

writers or sculptors but the benefits of their early experience will last a lifetime and hopefully make for better world. As for those who are exceptionally gifted and do choose careers in the arts and share their talents with us, let us celebrate them and give them the freedom and encouragement to create beauty and joy in this world in the hope that they will inspire others to do the same.

As I always say, everyone, even the poor deserve beauty - and play helps young minds discover the beauty of life and living.

Baroness Floella Benjamin is a Liberal Democrat peer in the House of Lords

Flexibility for summer birthday children: allowing all children to reach their potential

Chris Rose

Having worked as an infant teacher with a mixed Foundation and Key Stage 1 class for the last 20 years I have seen many children failed by the inflexibility of our education system. A year in a child's development when they are only four or five and its impact on the child's ability and readiness to learn is enormous. Most people would accept this as fact. Yet our inflexible education system expects two children one with their birthday on September 1st and one with their birthday on 31st August in the following year to start school together and be ready to move into Key Stage 1 together at the end of their foundation year. Whilst the foundation year is practically based both the five and the four year olds are expected to learn the basic phonics for reading and start to use these in writing and have begun addition, subtraction and using numbers to 10 ready for Key Stage 1.

Every year there are children with birthdays in the summer term who have potential to do well but are just not ready to learn. It is no coincidence that a high proportion of SEN children are born in the summer months and that statistically exam results are poorer for summer term children. Some summer birthday children move into Key Stage 1 without the basic building blocks for reading, writing and maths in place. This is not because they can't learn these skills but because they are just not ready. At age four they have already experienced a sense of failure and this can create a negative attitude because they know they are not achieving as well as their friends but don't know why.

This could easily be solved, changing the whole life chance for many children.

- After discussion between parents and teachers these children could be allowed to spend an extra year in nursery so that they start the Foundation year after they are five. How much more quickly they would learn and achieve. Instead of struggling many of them would be confident and so much happier!
- Alternatively, if a group of children with summer term birthdays are found not to be ready in the Foundation year for the skills they are expected to achieve teachers could have the flexibility to give them a practical play based curriculum in the knowledge that they could have a second year in foundation stage; this time looking ahead and feeling enthusiastic.
- The extra year would often help children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Parents want the very best for their children and are usually happy to be involved in the early years. Support at this stage for parent and child is absolutely crucial if the cycle of deprivation is to be broken.

Many summer term children are ready to learn and do well in the current system but some are failed by it. Our party believes in freedom and individual judgement and who better to make the decision to give some children a better and happier start in education than the parents and teachers together.

I have felt so helpless seeing many summer born children struggle even with the extra support we have tried to give them in our class knowing that their whole life and potential to learn could be changed by a more flexible system. I hope our party will look at ways to change this giving teachers freedom to do the very best for the children they teach and parents the confidence that their child had the best and happiest start on education's journey.

Chris Rose is a primary teacher and a District Councillor in Newark

Every Child a Reader: a plea for its continuation

Margaret Sharp

Many readers will be familiar with the 'Every Child a Reader' scheme that has been used in some primary schools as a reading recovery scheme. Its essence is to focus attention on 6-7 year olds who after a couple of years in class are still having trouble with reading and to provide them with intensive one-to-one tuition from a trained primary teacher. It was introduced into this country about twenty years ago after its successful development in New Zealand but was not widely taken up until the last few years, mainly because it costs £2000 a child and most primary schools could not afford such sums. However, an evaluation by KPMG in 2005 found it to be the most successful of all remedial reading schemes, after which it found favour with the Labour Government and they began introducing and funding it on a selective basis. Indeed, it was to be the corner-stone of their manifesto promise of one-to-one tuition for those pupils who were falling behind their peers.

It is not clear yet whether the Coalition will continue this funding, and I write this really as a plea to Ministers not to drop the scheme. It would seem to fit well our ideas for the Pupil Premium. At £2000 per pupil it is expensive, but, as we all know, if children cannot read properly by the time they leave primary school, they find it very difficult to cope with the secondary school curriculum. Instead, too often they join those who muck around at the back of the class, truant from age 14 and then find themselves entertained 'at her Majesty's pleasure' later in their teens. Much better to spend an effective £2000 when they are 6, than an ineffective £60,000 when they are 16!

Baroness Margaret Sharp is a Liberal Democrat peer in the House of Lords and a Spokesperson on educational issues

Why your local RE teacher needs you

Stuart Langhorn

Whenever you go to conference and meet new people one of the first things they ask you is what do you do? My reply tends to bring the conversation a halt. I am usually greeted with a sympathetic look and stunned silence or people start backing away thinking they have found some sort of fanatical nutcase. But I love my

job, I think it is a huge importance to the school curriculum – and I want to tell you why – and why your help is needed.

I have been teaching Religious Education for 16 years in secondary school on the Northwest coast – starting in Blackpool and now in Morecambe. The seaside highlights of the country! I teach in a large, state, non-faith community High school. All pupils take GCSE Short Course RE – with most taking a full GCSE course. We have around 60 students in the Sixth Form taking A Level Religious Studies.

Perhaps the confusion about RE stems from people's own experience at school – or their own prejudices. For many RE is synonymous with religious instruction; indoctrination into a particular faith. Richard Dawkins, a militant atheist, sees such instruction as tantamount to child abuse. Other view RE as an attempt at religious multi-culturalism. Some believers condemn a comparative approach that reduces their faith to a series of poorly portrayed phenomena. The reality is that good RE is neither of these things.

Religious Education is an academic study of living faiths and beliefs, increasingly; it involves the teaching of philosophy and ethics. In Lancashire the approach is through a field of enquiry involving shared human experience, beliefs and values, religious traditions and personal meaning. It asks pupils to learn about religion and from religion. Pupils engage with a wide range of personal and contemporary issues and learn how to analyse, discuss and find meaning from the contribution of a range of different faiths. In short RE allows pupils a safe space to understand the world in which they live and the contribution of a whole range of historic and contemporary beliefs.

As I write this the news is full of discussions on whether or not a mosque should be built near Ground Zero in New York. The tabloid nature of the telephone debate on the Jeremy Vine show illustrates, to me, why modern RE is needed more than ever. In our global economy people need to both know and understand each other belief and also how to communicate with each other. The ignorance and prejudice shown over the last few days is astounding and should be challenged.

Most people are unaware of RE's unique place in the curriculum. RE has been compulsory since 1944 – the 1988 Education Reform Act reinforced this status. GCSE and A Level courses are amongst the fastest growing in popularity with students. RE, however, is not part of the National Curriculum. Instead each Local Education Authority has to have a Standing Advisory Council for RE (SACRE) and a Locally Agreed Syllabus. The SACRE is made up of representatives from different faith communities, teaching professionals and appointed councillors. They also have some responsibility for the teaching and delivery of RE within their LA schools. It is that localism which is strength. In the RE world we don't need to be told the importance of starting with your local community and involving them – we have been doing it for years!

However, it is ironic that just at the time that the Coalition is talking of localism and freedom to teach RE finds itself facing a threat. Firstly it comes from a voice that believes that we should have a National Curriculum for RE. This group believe that this would secure RE's status and lead to a standardised content. There is a national shortage of qualified, specialist RE teachers and so a National Curriculum may help with the delivery in schools. In my view, this would be the wrong way for RE to go. As we emphasise the importance of decision making to be made at the local level – in or SACREs we have excellent examples of how communities of faith, and those of no faith, are working together. It has also allowed for great imagination, creativity and development of the subject at a local level. RE is providing a good example of what we, as Liberal Democrats, have been saying is needed in education – a freedom to teach and innovate.

The second threat comes from budgetary cutbacks. As local authorities seek to save money withdrawing funds from their SACRE and getting rid of their RE advisor may be tempting. Indeed there are those who would argue that a National Curriculum for RE would be a good thing just because it is cheaper. However, the contribution that the SACRE and Locally Agreed Syllabus make to community cohesion should not be underestimated. Many SACREs also have a Youth Council where young people of many different cultures

meet. They provide a forum where dialogue takes place and trust between communities is built up. If SACREs are removed and the status of RE downgraded – this good work will be lost.

I believe that I have demonstrated how RE is delivering what we as Liberal Democrats want to see in education. RE recognises that schools are about much more than producing statistics for the government. This is where RE needs your help. If you are a councillor find out about your SACRE. Make sure that you support it through difficult times. It is good value for money and a great investment for the future.

Stuart Langhorn is a Liberal Democrat Councillor and Leader of Lancaster City Council

The educated citizen

Sue Garden

The Coalition Government has begun its work on education with the Academies Bill, which has generated wide-ranging consultation, discussion and debate. One of the many issues which was raised again was how the curriculum could (and should) contribute to students becoming productive, well-informed and well-adjusted citizens.

There is a powerful case for PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education) being a core part of schooling – this is not just ‘sex education’ as some media reports suggest, but a comprehensive programme to enable young people to cope with different relationships and to manage the complexities of adult life. In the final hours of the Labour government, the proposal to make PSHE a statutory subject was lost, but there will be further opportunities to put this right in forthcoming legislation.

Meanwhile, GCSE Citizenship, is gathering supporters. The Five Nations Network (England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) issued a Call to Action last September, with key points:

- Ensuring that every young person across the Five Nations has a right and entitlement to high quality citizenship and values education
- Galvanising support in educating people to play an active and responsible part in democratic life and exercise their rights and responsibilities
- Getting politicians and policy makers to make a renewed commitment to Citizenship and Values Education to enable young people to engage with our increasingly complex, challenging and changing world

Different parts of the syllabus link across to other subject areas, and help to clarify the relevance to real life of lessons such as maths, history and modern languages. There are echoes of these aims in our recent Policy Paper *Free to be Young*, with its exciting collection of ideas to help young people play a constructive part in their community. The years of compulsory schooling provide a framework for every child to learn and develop, but, as the Paper makes clear ‘Effective education and learning also happens outside the classroom.’

Young people who participate in youth groups, sport, music, cadets, scouts, not only build up their confidence and self-respect, but are far more likely to go on to lead fulfilling and productive lives. Looking through the other end of the telescope, very few of them will feature amongst the disturbingly high numbers of youth offenders.

The General Election generated an unusual amount of interest in politics. It provided an opportunity to explode the mystique of the electoral process, with many schools setting aside time in the school day to follow the campaigns, the personalities and the policies. As an indication of this interest, the Peers in Schools' outreach programme has had requests from over 500 schools – both secondary and primary – for a member of the House of Lords to talk about the work of the second chamber.

We are scheduled to have five years before the next General Election. In the intervening time, as Liberal Democrats and as partners in government, we should use our platforms to encourage young people to volunteer for the 'Big Society' and aim to build up an informed and engaged electorate of the future.

Baroness Sue Garden is a Liberal Democrat peer in the House of Lords

Education: a key to youth political empowerment

Helen Flynn

For the future of our young people it has never been more urgent that we should seek ways to ignite their political interests, to give them a meaningful voice, and to show them that politics is relevant to and for them. Education could provide a major lever in providing them with the insights, skills and experience they need to begin to shape their own destinies through the political process. This article explores these issues in an attempt to stimulate a debate on youth political empowerment.

But first a brief overview of the current well publicised, and unprecedented series of seemingly intractable issues affecting our young people.

- The number of NEETs is unacceptably high, hovering around the 1,000,000 mark for well over a year, with long term youth unemployment up more than a fifth on a year ago, according to a recent TUC report (*TUC Analysis of Jobseekers Allowance Data, 10 August 2010, <http://www.tuc.org.uk/welfare/tuc-18322-f0.cfm>*).
- Young people leaving higher education are saddled with debt averaging £24,700 (*Push Student Debt Survey, August 2010, www.push.co.uk*).
- The average age of the first-time buyer in 2007 was 34 (recent press reports have put this figure at 38), compared with 27 in 1977 (*GE Money Home Lending (UK) & The Future Foundation, August 2007; recent article in The Independent, 'No place like home: the generation who can't afford to buy', 16 March 2010*), reflecting escalating property prices combined with high levels of personal debt.
- Schemes designed to facilitate young people gaining jobs and work training, such as the Future Jobs Fund, have recently been scrapped by the Coalition Government
- To cap all this, most scientists agree that climate change will create a very uncertain future for mankind, testing the creativity and resilience of young people in finding solutions and overcoming problems which are not of their making.

Given that this is a group of people (aged 18-25) that in anyone's opinion is hard done by, it is perhaps surprising that this is also the group that displays the greatest level of apathy when turning out at general and, especially, local elections. Arguably, this is the group of voters who will gain most by exercising their right to

vote, as through their empowerment they can begin to challenge the status quo and begin to shape a better future—a future in which they ultimately have a much greater stake than other, older voting groups.

It could be that many of the issues listed above have created an infantilising effect on our young people, delaying the age at which they first vote. Whereas in the recent past, an 18 or 21-year-old's general expectation on leaving school, college or university for work, would commonly be to leave home and begin to live an independent life, the same does not apply now. The growing norm is for young people to live with and be part-funded by their parents well into their twenties - delaying the age of personal responsibility, active citizenship and thus the spur to vote - for easily comprehensible reasons rather than (often unfairly attributed) indolence.

Though the solutions to the problems highlighted above are undoubtedly multi-layered and complex, a starting point arguably lies in re-shaping our education system in practical ways. Various strategic paths are outlined below.

- One path is through the statutory part of the National Curriculum. New Labour made a nod to this by introducing citizenship as part of the personal and social strand of the curriculum. But as most of this teaching is not formally assessed or recorded in any league table, it is the poor relation to subjects which are examined, and in many cases is simply not taken seriously by many students. A radical (and possibly illiberal!) proposal would be to make “Citizenship” a compulsory subject, to be examined at the age of 16, to instill a greater sense of personal responsibility and a greater awareness of how individuals can affect their life chances through the political process.
- Another path is to empower children whilst still at school. Moves by the Liberal Democrats to reduce the voting age to 16 are sensible, as many children would vote for the first time whilst still in compulsory education. They would therefore still—hopefully—be experiencing broad and impartial teaching and learning about citizenship from which they could both form their own opinions on how they would like to vote and begin to understand the importance of voting.
- An additional path involves the operation of schools and how greater levels of democracy can be incorporated into the day-to-day running of schools, so that pupil empowerment becomes real and meaningful. Democratic systems centred around forums for pupil voice, such as school councils and senates, could be expanded to make sure that pupil voice is embedded into the way a school operates, rather than being just a bolt-on. That way, pupils can see that their decisions, which have been democratically determined, can actually affect outcomes. In addition, greater effort could be made to ensure that pupils send representatives to governing body meetings. It seems odd that though pupils represent the single greatest stakeholder group, they have little input into school governance.
- Finally, we have to address what and how children are actually taught at school. Despite the last Government's claims for the economic relevance of education, many young people rightly feel that what is taught in school, college and university has little relation to the issues they will have to address and the jobs they will have to search for after they leave. We need to address the relevance of what we teach children for the changing world of work urgently, or we face fall-off both in participation in education (as why bother if you cannot successfully get jobs at the end of it?), and arguably even greater disengagement with the political process (as why bother when politicians have not even provided an environment where young people can get jobs?). There has never been a better time to re-engage with the ‘skills versus knowledge’ debate. I would argue that skills simply have to take precedence—especially given the ubiquity of knowledge, courtesy of the Internet—despite traditional (some may say “Gove-ian”) views of education.

To conclude, universal suffrage is, sadly, now taken for granted, with many young people seemingly unaware of how great ‘people power’ can be in shifting the direction of travel in national politics. If we can engage

our youth with politics through their education, we can help to empower and mobilize generations to come, and the future then could indeed finally look exciting, fresh, different and hopeful for us all.

Helen Flynn is Parliamentary Spokesperson for Skipton & Ripon and NEC Member of CASE

Patrick Short

Patrick Short, who was the driver of the car which collided with a school bus outside Keswick in May, was a lifelong active Liberal. Son of a clergyman, he was brought up in Cumbria. He opted to go to Sandhurst rather than university, and worked in childcare and in sales after leaving the army. He found his vocation as a teacher in his late twenties, specialising in PE, science and ICT. He chose to work in inner London comprehensive schools, where he took increasing pastoral responsibilities as head of house and acting deputy head in Hampstead School. He was an inspiring teacher and a natural disciplinarian, establishing understanding relationships with pupils and their parents.

His educational expertise led to his becoming a co-opted member of Hertfordshire County Council in the 1980s. He was regional chair of the party at the time, and had been closely involved in the negotiations with the SDP. Experience with the NUT was good preparation for one who enjoyed contesting an argument, but knew that decisions had to be made. He later served as a local councillor in Cumbria and was a parish councillor at the time of his death.

As election agent for many years, he worked hard to get others elected, and was fond of telling how he saved a deposit by demanding a third recount: the returning officer decided it was cheaper to grant the candidate the few votes necessary. Funds raised in the wealthy borough of Kensington and Chelsea were used at Patrick's suggestion to help Ed Davey's election in Kingston and Surbiton, and colleagues in the Royal Borough attribute the recent success of one of their candidates to the groundwork done earlier when Patrick was chairing the local party.

When the LDEA was revived some twenty years ago, Patrick soon became a member of the Executive Committee. In 1992, after Don Foster's appointment as our parliamentary spokesman, he became a key member of the team which met fortnightly in Westminster to thrash out policy and to advise Don. Patrick's input to content and to presentation was hugely important in winning the respect of professionals for our ideas. After taking early retirement, Patrick worked voluntarily in Don's parliamentary office, moving with him for a while when he took the portfolio for the environment.

Patrick's move from Letchworth to Ladbroke Grove in 1992 made his home an even easier venue for LDEA committee meetings, and the lunches he prepared made a welcome conclusion of business. But Cumbria called him back: in 2001 he and Wendy found and converted an old house in Braithwaite near Keswick and made it a most hospitable home. Patrick's delight in cooking now found a place, sometimes literally, beside his delight in debate, and he developed his passion for music as chair of Cumbria Rural Choirs. He came out of retirement in 2007 when he was appointed a Children's Services Manager, leading four children's centres in Allerdale for Barnardo's, a job he described as the best he ever had.

When the accident happened, Patrick was 68. So sudden an end to a life being so fully lived inevitably causes sorrow, but there is much to give thanks for too, both at the crowded Requiem Mass led by the Bishop of Carlisle in July, and since, in thoughts of his vivid, friendly, energetic and stimulating self.

This obituary has been written by Anthony Bowen