



**POLITICAL  
INTELLIGENCE**

# Northern Powerhouse Education, Employment & Skills Summit 2022

Dods Summary

By Tom Hunter



## NPEESS 2022: Bridging the Gaps

On June 16 Dods Political Intelligence consultant Tom Hunter, who covers the education and skills sector, attended the Northern Powerhouse Education, Employment and Skills Summit (NPEESS) in Manchester. This report, which contains a summary of two panel discussions, represents a sample of the coverage provided to Political Intelligence clients from the conference, which included readouts of the keynote speeches and question and answer sessions.

In the first discussion, panelists including the CEO of Centrepoint charity Seyi Obakin and director of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership Henri Murison, exchanged views on how to bridge gaps in education, employment, and skills, a key issue for the sector even before the Covid crisis exacerbated inequalities.

In the second panel, the Labour mayors of Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and West Yorkshire discussed a range of education issues including the legacy of the Covid crisis and the belief that local government officials often have a better grasp of the skills requirements in their areas than central government.

### Panel: Bridging the Gaps in Education, Employment and Skills

#### Participants:

- Chair: Anne Longfield, chair of the Commission on Young Lives
- Seyi Obakin, CEO, Centrepoint
- Georgina Burt, England Development Manager, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)
- Richard Caulfield, North West Regional Director, Association of Colleges (AoC) North
- Henri Murison, Director, Northern Powerhouse Partnership (NPP)
- Cllr Susan Hinchcliffe, Leader, Bradford Council

**Anne Longfield**, chair of the Commission on Young Lives and former children's commissioner for England, asked the panel what it would take to bridge the gaps between education, employment and skills.

**Henri Murison, director of NPP**, said it would take us intervening in individual places, such as Bradford. He noted that in certain areas there were large proportions of long-term disadvantaged children, which led to the attainment gap widening in secondary school. He added that the focus needed to be on those white working class and Black-Caribbean children who under-performed even compared to the rest of their demographic group.

He said a place-based approach was needed and that they wouldn't solve these issues without addressing gaps in outcomes for young people locally in the North. He added that they needed to make sure opportunities created up here would go to them – otherwise young, middle-class, white graduates from the south would be coming up and taking those opportunities. He argued there hadn't been enough money spent on the most disadvantaged children in the most disadvantaged areas. If they didn't focus on these elements, they would simply end up rewarding those who already had advantage, he concluded.



**Cllr Susan Hinchcliffe, Labour leader of Bradford Council**, said there were multiple barriers to success for young people – particularly for Bradford, which was one of the youngest cities in the country.

She said mental health was important. The lack of support through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) was hindering young peoples' chances, she said, and added that reducing persistent absence was important. She said FE also presented opportunities to catch up on some of those gaps. She argued BTECs being phased out was a massive mistake, particularly given its success, and that there were question marks over the early success of T Levels. Cllr Hinchcliffe said the government needed to listen to local leaders and combined authorities – there needed to be fewer national initiatives and more local responses to the issues.

**Seyi Obakin, CEO of Centrepoint**, said if the UK didn't close the education gap, it would end up with more young people that needed help from the likes of Centrepoint. The gap wasn't just about what happened in schools, he said, it was also about what happened in families – if you get that wrong, that feeds into schools, and children leave with no education and skills. If there was no intervention, there would come a point where children would have slipped down so far that Skills Bootcamps and other such measures would be unable to help, he argued. Without tackling illiteracy and innumeracy, they would end up with long-term unemployment, and while he welcomed funding from government, the important thing was where, and whether it was reaching the right families. While he said free school meal (FSM) eligibility was used as measure of deprivation, there were still families who slipped through that net too.

**Georgina Burt, England development manager at CPAG**, noted child poverty didn't feature in the levelling-up or schools' White Paper, which was the fundamental problem: all strategies and initiatives would always be held back until they got to grips with child poverty. While she said schools were doing amazing things, they shouldn't be doing it all and they needed support – the government needed to address poverty as a root cause.

She suggested some measures that could be taken within the education system, such as listening to children and young people to understand what being in school was like. She noted young people had said there was inequity within the classroom, and argued children were missing out on opportunities because of barriers related to household income.

**Richard Caulfield, NW Director at the AoC**, spoke of the challenges around mental health in further education for young people. He said there needed to be further investment in skills infrastructure, especially as recent Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) research had shown chronic underinvestment in this area. He said there needed to be investment in the workforce – he explained that on average, an FE teacher would be paid £9,000 less than a schoolteacher. He warned against “initiative-itis”, where government throw initiatives at the sector, saying there were too many flying around, when they just needed investment.

Caulfield also said the apprenticeship levy needed to be focused on the under-25s, not on additional qualifications, such as MBAs, for existing employees. He also suggested colleges could be key anchor institutions locally, and play a further role in careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG). He argued loans alone weren't going to cut it, saying potential learners weren't going to come back to education on the promise of “jam tomorrow” and the government needed to make sure people could afford to learn without being put in poverty.



## Northern Mayors Panel

### Participants:

- Chair: Rob Parsons, Editor, The Northern Agenda
- Andy Burnham, Mayor, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), Labour
- Steve Rotheram, Mayor, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA), Labour
- Tracy Brabin, Mayor, West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA), Labour

**Steve Rotheram, Liverpool City Region mayor**, began by saying the DfE were the worst government department he'd ever worked with and were not a decentralising department. He said he would like further powers to have flexibility to not only deliver national curriculum, but also do things to help young people be filtered towards skills and training needed where demands were.

On the apprenticeship levy, he said it was “nothing more than a stealth tax”, unless used appropriately, which he argued it wasn't. While its original design was to address skills gaps, it was instead being spent on degree-plus qualifications in the City of London by companies that would previously have funded the course themselves. He said local leaders knew best on skills needs and central government needed to work with them.

**Tracy Brabin, West Yorkshire mayor**, said addressing skills shortages and provision was one of the biggest responsibilities of the mayors. She agreed with Rotheram that they knew what was needed for their areas. She described West Yorkshire as a “unique creative crucible” in the North, and said they knew that the big problems – across all sectors – stemmed from the skills pipeline. She said another challenge was that there were skilled young people in low-skilled jobs, so there was a missing link in getting them into the best roles.

She said the ‘Multiply’ scheme, delivered from Whitehall, was an example of a lack of understanding in Westminster, and government didn't appreciate how much work was required to get adults into a position of doing their GCSE maths.

The adult education budget (AEB) gave powers for 19+ education, but Brabin argued a lot of damage was already done by then, which was why they needed more powers around ages 16-19. She suggested careers services should be devolved as each region knew what was required, and this differed from area to area.

**Andy Burnham, Greater Manchester mayor**, agreed with his colleagues. He said they were about to test whether they could have these powers, as part of their negotiation over being a ‘trailblazer’ with the government. He argued control over 19+, co-design on 16-19, tidying up the career's services, and apprenticeship levy should be under combined authority control. He said inflexible skills offered through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) route created a huge task ahead. He also said they needed a school-age curriculum that served the city properly and moved away from the education system brought in a decade ago. He asked how they could have an education system that devalued creative skills and ICT in a city like Manchester.

Burnham said there needed to be a culture change on the ‘correct’ route through education into employment. He argued it was still all about university, but this left too many not knowing where their future was. Likewise, he argued the government was putting obstacles in the way for those

who wanted to go into higher education, which was damaging to social mobility. There needed to be parity of esteem between FE and HE, with government support, he said.

### **Youth Engagement Group – Q&A with Mayors**

Kezia, a young person from the Manchester regional youth work unit, spoke about the impact of the pandemic on young peoples' education, but – most importantly – the impact on mental health and wellbeing. She said a survey she'd conducted had suggested pupils wanted more emotional support as well as catch-up lessons from school.

Rotherham said his administration had identified there would be a pandemic of mental ill health during and after Covid, and his team had started planning accordingly. He said they were building mental wellbeing into their fair employment charter. He said there was also an issue with waiting lists for services.

Rory, a young person from Wigan, who grew up in local authority care, said many care-experienced young people were missed out of these conversations and there was a huge gap in the care sector for this. He said children in care had some of the worst outcomes in the country – mostly caused by instability – which had an overall impact on employment opportunities. He asked what was being done in the North for children in care, and what they were doing differently.

Burnham said Manchester had developed the Manchester 'care leavers guarantee' – a standard set of services that they can count on. One of these was offering free prescriptions up to aged 25, an agreement with housing providers that care-experienced young people couldn't be made intentionally homeless, and they had also extended free bus pass to aged 21 for care leavers.

Rory said the bus pass had been almost life-changing for some care-leavers, particularly during the cost-of-living crisis.

Burnham suggested to his colleagues that they considered a harmonized 'M62/Northern care-leavers guarantee'.

Rory noted that one of the big issues in social care was that every council had a different offer. He said you'd think there would be a baseline standard, but there wasn't, which led to care-leavers moving out of area and instability. He then asked the mayors to look at the recent Children's Social Care Review as he believed it held the key to unlocking potential.

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