

SOUTHERN REGION SCHOOLS COMMITTEE

7th May 2025 Online Meeting – Chessington

Chaired & hosted by Katie Feighan, Nick Day

Introduction by Nick Day

Nick welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Dan Shears - Health & Safety

Update on the UK COVID-19 Inquiry and Key Issues in Education

UK COVID-19 Inquiry

Dan began with an important update on the UK COVID-19 Inquiry. We're approaching a critical phase where the inquiry will begin hearing evidence related to schools and education. This is a significant opportunity to reflect on how the pandemic impacted our education system, but there are some concerns about how the inquiry is currently handling the collection of evidence.

We've encountered issues with the way testimonies are being gathered, particularly around the experiences of educators and support staff. However, it's important to stress that there is still time to submit evidence—either through Dan or directly to the inquiry. If you have a story to share, your voice matters and can still be heard.

Covid 19. Covid inquiry was set up by Boris Johnson. It has 10 modules, and the first module has been released. Evidence has been taken from the key members of the government but nothing specific about schools. We had a huge number of concerns about schools closing and the role of the staff and the Teachers. Horrendous numbers of staff affected and how schools were managed, bubbles etc. Ventilation standards in schools' we know that ventilation was critical in spreading Covid. Key workers needed to have their children in education. The schools needed to be open, and safety was paramount. Children were carriers.

Enquiry needs to be explicit and understand the need for evidence for Module 8. GMB are part of the TUC bringing the evidence to the report. It is managed around the effect on the child, and it is difficult to be specific. We need to understand the effects on those under the age of 18. Sept to October is evidence gathering time. During Module 10 workers impact may be discussed.

Inquiry to conclude by 2026. We are looking at keyworkers during this time. We need evidence from members as we need to produce this now. Core issues need to be looked at e.g was it appropriate for school staff to administer tests or should they have been handed out? Some schools were closed by LA due to number of cases. We need to get the maximum amount out of the enquiry.

Every Story Matters closed 23rd May to encourage members to have their say. It has shaped how the report is used. Any issues can also be raised directly, and Dan is happy to receive any information to support the inquiry. Views of the workforce is key in the schools, hospitals, care homes. Please share your stories.

Christine – Pleased that National are looking at the aftermath of the Covid 19. Our members were affected more about pay and getting recognised for pay and getting sick pay.

Module on economic support – pay is covered under this. DS forwarding info on loss of earnings etc. Pay rewards are not reflecting what support members

Christine – Long Term Covid – what's happening with these members – some have lost jobs – inquiry not keen on looking at long Covid.

During the Spanish flu we see the development of other health conditions. It is important and that this is looked at. TUC is pushing to make sure this is covered in Module 10.

Needs individual cases/stories that he can share as they need to be heard. What happened in practice not in theory.

Patricia – do you have the date on how many TAs's we lost during the Covid?

We have some data for the first year, but it is not broken down by category. But Unionline kept some data. He will go back to UL and NAU to see what data we have. Evidence is not easy to collate.

Patricia – Data on race and ethnicity?

Good quality evidence - high infection rates in keyworker homes. We are making sure the inquiry is looking at these. Comms were going out daily, but it did not cater for ethnic groups.

The government believed that they had the best plans. Gavin Williamson made bad plans, but he did not work with the Unions. The DFE had to be dragged to meetings and did not want to engage. Decisions taken for political reasons.

Cheryl – how will the enquiry get the information on how children were affected.

There is comprehensive evidence from independent Drs and other Health officials. There are gaps e.g schools is always about teachers and not support staff or TA's. Most Teachers worked remotely. GMB is shaping the issues that the government are addressing. We know that the schools are a big focus for the inquiry.

Asbestos in Schools: A Continuing Concern

On a related note, Dan went on to highlight a recent conference held on April 20th for Workers' Memorial Day, hosted by the TUC. The focus was on asbestos in the environment, with a particular emphasis on schools.

We heard updates from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) regarding inspections carried out in schools over the past year. The findings were concerning and highlighted the need for continued vigilance and action. Dan shared some of the latest ATC guidance in the chat.

Asbestos in schools, a long-standing campaign. Not a common disease but it is the biggest cause of death in the UK. Asbestos was seen as the 'Magic building material'. Lots of schools are old buildings that has prefab builds in them. Asbestos degrades and ends up in the environment. This causes lung issues and other cancers. Numbers in school are low but the number in schools is raising. All asbestos needs to be removed from schools.

Government is now taking this seriously and schools and hospitals are priority on getting this removed. Schools are keen to manage this, but it is better to encapsulate the asbestos rather than remove it. Positive measures from the government now. Register of all public

buildings that have asbestos would be useful, those identified need to be monitored. HSE has taken evidence under the school's surveys for RAK, asbestos will be present.

About 6 in 10 of the schools that were visited did not have a management system in place or a competent survey. GMB have regular meetings, finance is an issue, the money is not available, but focus will be refurbished not knocked down. Control measures need to be in place to ensure individuals are not at risk. The Government need to manage the risks and ensure that checklists are followed. It takes 10-40 years for asbestos risks to manifest, make sure it goes on record with GP. Also register with Unionline.

Katie – Should we make sure members who work in an environment where the school has an asbestos register

Health conditions that may occur in the future, being on the register can help future risks and offer reassurance.

Robert – I've worked in 2 schools with asbestos; can we put on info retrospectively?

Go to Unionline and get on the register.

Violence in Schools: Campaigning for Change

Dan also wanted to briefly touch on the issue of violence in schools. We're seeing troubling trends, and while we had hoped to launch a campaign this year, the demands of the COVID-19 inquiry have delayed our timeline. We now anticipate launching this work next year, and I'll keep you updated as plans develop.

Hoped to have a new guide out before Congress about violence in schools. We will be updating this guide and ensure that there are new regulations put in place. Employers think that violence and aggression in schools is part of the role. Every incident can be seen, and the risk can be building – there are flash points. Specific issues. Poor communication in some school environments. CCTV can help or hinder. Effective training of staff to be clear on communication. Section 2/3 on the HSE at Work

1. Every incident should be recorded
2. Previous knowledge should be included if warning signs are missed.

People have the right to claim compensation

Christine – TA unconscious when a parent attacked them with a crowbar outside the building. Not worked there 2 years. Under new employment law she should now be covered.

Compensation claims can now kick in much earlier than before. Information sharing across agencies should be available to all if there is a known risk, GDPR issues.

Burnout and Job Insecurity Among Support Staff

Finally, Dan wants to raise a growing concern around burnout and job insecurity among school support staff. We're hearing reports—not just from the Southern Region, but across the country—of staff not being asked to return at the end of term. This is deeply worrying and speaks to broader issues of workforce stability and wellbeing in our schools.

Burnout – schools' staff are taking on more and more work and there is a lack of resources. We should be looking at a collective campaign but if you are noticing workloads are increasing. Dedicated school union is what the NEU are looking at, other unions disagree with this as we believe they do not have non-teaching member's view.

Patricia – in our council NEU used to sign the policy changes. GMB support policies but will not necessarily sign off on policies as we must represent members affected by the policy change.

Ava – in meetings, disciplinary's, policies have been consulted with the Unions, but Union may not agree with everything in the policy what can be done?

From a H&S perspective we can do a written response saying that we do not agree with the policy changes. So, we have an audit trail so we can protect our members.

Any other concerns happy to take questions or email Dan or Lindsey. Local issues talk to Katie or Nick. Dan will add links into chat.

Nick thanked Dan for his input and his work for the Covid inquiry and introduced Barbara

Barbara Plant - National President Update

Barbara gave an introduction on her background; she was originally a teaching assistant in primary schools for 14 years. Was the seconded to Lewisham as the Education Convener and chaired the National Schools Committee for a while before it was handed that over to Christine. Then she became National President. But when she was seconded in 2009, part of that role as to sit on the original SSSNB the school support staff, negotiating body that had been set up then by the previous Labour government. So, Ed Balls was the Secretary of State for education set it up.

It was all going well within a year we managed to produce 101 role profiles for every job you could think of in a school. Even down to a vicar in a in a church school. Literally every role that we could think of. We had a job evaluation scheme, or we evaluated those profiles. We produced a new handbook equivalent to the Green Book. Now the NJC Green book. But this was going to be called the Yellow Book, and it would just be specifically for school support staff and would also produce or start producing a standard contract for school support staff. We were just on the verge of trialling that in about 5 local authorities to see if it would work and then we had the election, and the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats took power, and Michael Gove became the new Education Secretary.

Michael Gove damaged education over the years, he called it a quango as soon as he came in. He wrote a letter to the independent chair saying it was a quango and just overnight abolished it.

So, it's taken obviously 15 years to get back another Labour government, but in those 15 years GMB have campaigned hard with the Labour Party to get into their manifesto. So, when obviously they got into power, that was one of the first things, that they put into their employment rights bill. It's now part of that bill going through Parliament. Part of their plan to deliver and to make work pay.

The employment rights bill is now at the Lord's stage, so it's gone through the Commons. It's at the Lord's committee stage, and then when it comes back to the Commons, it be for Royal Assent. We don't know how long that's going to take, but in the meantime, what's happened

is we've set up a sort of non-statutory SSSNB and we're just looking at how it's going to work and what it's going to deliver on. It is negotiating body between employers and unions.

The difference now is that unlike in 2009, when it was first set up, there are Academy chains, they didn't really exist back in 2009. So, the negotiating body was just between the church schools and the local government authority we now have on the employer side as well as the Local Government Association and the Church of England and the Catholic Education Service. We've now got the Confederation of School Trust, which represents the Academy trusts and then on the Union side, we've got Unison, GMB and Unite and no mention of NEU taking any part in this negotiating body at all. They would love to, but we're not going to let that happen.

It's been divided into 3 strands. The first strand is just called the operating model, but what will the SSSNB look like - Barbara and Stacey sit on that. They've met twice; the 2nd strand is about role profiles and job evaluation. On this we will have someone from the National Schools Committee, Joy Lapsley. She's from Northeast Yorkshire Humber Region, and they have only met once. Then the third strand is called transition and that's about how will we move support staff from their existing arrangements onto anything that the SSSNB agrees.

So just to go back to Strand 1, the operating model, we've basically spent the first two meetings just looking at the Constitution, so, who's going to sit on it? There will be a number of representatives from each side, so in the past it was 50 was 50.

From the employer's side, 15 from the trade union's side, they seem to think that's a pretty good number to go with again.

They haven't appointed an independent chair, but we've seen the kind of person, the job description and personal spec for that. We're talking about do we want to have guest members come in and maybe talk about, the role of support staff and what they do or observers because the SSSNB is only going to apply to England. But it may be that somebody from Wales or Scotland would like to just come and observe.

We're talking about do we need a quorate If there's not enough people around the table can we make decisions? Will there be substitutes be allowed? And do we need outside support? In the previous SSSNB we had support from HR firm as well as the Office of Manpower, which doesn't exist anymore, but I think it's turned into another government department.

Overarching this is the Secretary of State does have the kind of final word to ratify any agreements that's made between the employers and the unions. So representing her, we've got members of the Department for Education sitting around the table as well. They're leading the negotiations at the moment or leading the sort of conversations at the moment. So really that's all we've achieved in strand 1 is what is what the Constitution will look like.

The employers and the unions have said well, it's up for us to how we work, it's not for us to tell the employers how they want to work together, and it's not for the employers to tell the unions how they want to work together.

The Strand 2 is probably the more contentious strand it this is the one that's looking at role profiles and job evaluation. The fact we've said we've only had one meeting and that was dominated by the Confederation of School Trusts, which is an Academy. The one that represents academies, they were of the opinion that that's not what we needed to do, and they put together a paper and a presentation.

The unions very much at that meeting expressed their concerns and saying no, we do need to have a good evaluation job evaluation that that actually, picks up on all the things that we know that support staff do. But when you try to do a job evaluation, they can never be scored because they're just not written in the way that that allows you to do that, and they're not weighted. So, you know, if you use the GLPC, you get weighting for handling money, stock and premises. But you know, if you're looking after a group of children that's not seen as being important enough to give you, enough points to make you when it comes out in the job evaluation score.

So, we met the three unions, met after that meeting and we put forward a joint paper expressing the fact that it's job evaluation and role profiles that are key. We know they've changed so much since. Specifically in 2009, especially the role profiles of staff that work in work in class or those that work with SEND children. Teaching assistants are taking on more and more roles and HLTA's are delivering lessons. So

So, once we've got the job profiles and the job evaluation that the separate issue then we will be about negotiating on pay, we haven't really talked about that at all yet.

Barbara was keen to hear feedback and to have input as to what you think the SSSNB should be, it is going to be a long process. It isn't going to be happen quickly, but it is important that we do need to get it right.

We need to get it right as to what we want from it to deliver to our members. The most important thing is that the SSSNB gives support staff a voice. We hear that the NEU dominates all of schools and teachers' voices. We all know that support staff are undervalued, underpaid and there are problems with the recruitment and retention. So hopefully this will deliver on those issues.

Christine – at National schools where it was presented. Job evaluations have been taken on by CAGE as we don't know how they are scored. More people need to be trained in Job Evaluations, as it is a complicated process. Refresher courses are key.

We agree with training on Job evaluations as there is a lack of it. Union staff, HR and Heads need to understand its importance. National office are providing training at the end of May for JE for school staff. Importance of vocabulary, wording needs to be specific for the roles being evaluated. Are there other schemes that can be looked at.

Christine - Federation schools trusts, and faith schools have concerns about how they are covered as they do not follow job roles.

Unions are united and was Job Evaluations roles that need to be united across all schools

Rob – Concern that the Job Evaluation scheme will be used like single status – deliberately dumbing roles down and cutting pay.

Role profiles need to be accurate and show the changes in the role. This will acknowledge the skills of the support staff. And then we can look at the pay and negotiate accordingly.

Rob – Many staff went through bespoke assessments as you don't fit the role.

Role profiles – looking at families – number of different profiles within the families.

Maria – Kent has its own pay scheme and Job evaluations. TA's delivering specified work. National minimum wage SSSNB will be a massive improvement for our staff

Shows importance and that academies will be involved in this.

Cover supervision roles increasing.

26 tasks taken off teachers, guidance/best practice. Things have gone wrong since 2002. Staff need to be rewarded for their roles

Claire – Performance management – demonstration of roles. We don't get performance enhancements with pay.

Not all schools do Performance Management – it comes down to support staff being treated differently to teachers. – no progression. Performance management can be an issue as staff are worried about capability issues.

Christine – Listening to stories how can we help and support with the strand?

Nothing in place presently but Barbra will chat to Stacey and Joy and see how we can get this feedback from members.

Christine – terminology has changed and our experiences

Maria – Pay – total contribution pay – what came from your Performance Review, some staff got a higher rate, and this was based on budgets.

Performance Management good for training but not for pay.

Nick thanked Barbra for the work she is doing on this

NJC Pay

Nick posted a link into the chat about the NJC pay offer.

The employers have made an offer of 3.2% across the boards (See link for information) with dates etc.

Where we are as a union, we have agreed to go to ballot open from 12th May to 20th June. Promoting physical balloting. Some schools will be visited, contact your region officer to arrange a meeting, ROT team in Medway and Reading.

We are preparing a briefing regarding what the NEU are doing. Important that this information is available in the schools. We are recommending a rejection.

Chrisstine - Recommendation is to reject and to explain to the members that we can go back to employer. TS's do not like to come out of strike. We need training on phone banking in case we go to CIVICA. Nick explained how CIVICA work and explained the importance of voting whether an accept or reject.

Alison – We are running two webinars for reps and then all members to explain the difference on voting.

Webinars are helpful in explaining the levels of understanding in voting and how the process works with the legal implications/timelines. Increases activity

Robert – Are pay rises unfunded

It likely will not be, not specific in the offer that has been made.

Robert – Changes in roles, loss of roles increases in hours.

FAQ's will be issued. NJC will seek clarification, and this will be fed back. Nick will ensure that clarification is included in the Webinar.

Alison – Any questions please add to the chat or school reps' what's app group so they can be added to the FAQ

Sue – some members getting confused with NJC and Kent.

These are separate.

Katie – We have had a previous FAQ. She will forward old FAQ as a starting point. Large amount of comms will go out to members, so members understand the differences

Nick – will chat to Regional Officers, encourage members to vote and attend webinars and engage. Members need to engage with us,

Katie – Highlighted the importance of the WhatsApp group, to join email Kate. Details in the group chat.

AOB

Nick requested a 'Chair' from the Activists as it is your forum. Please consider the role.

Regional schools conference – We plan to hold one in January 2026, one day at a weekend, locations are still being reviewed. Childcare will be covered. Encouraging local branches to help fund overnight accommodation. Anything you would like on the agenda we would like your ideas e.g campaigns etc. Looking to put on a legal briefing too.

Alison – mini session on spinal points and scales to get a better understanding (Webinar?)

Should be a good positive day and good for networking and hopefully it will be beneficial. London Region have already run one with excellent feedback.

Survey on what you want to see in future meetings.

Robert – any plan for national action on funding. NEU are using this as a method to recruit members.

Nick – We have a national meeting on 8/5/25 and will raise this at the meeting.

Christine – Has the region any strategies on schools' closures in Southern Region. Greenwich asked for enhanced redundancy, accredited training. Do we have a clear plan for members that are losing their jobs due to school closures. Primary schools are closing, and this will eventually impact secondary schools.

Nick will contact the Branch regarding this is encourage best practice across the area. This is an example of a good campaign and should be shared.

Christine - Group chat is a great source of information. How do we deal with people that want to leave the GMB and move to NEU.

Nick – We need to ensure that we are on the ball and explain what the NEU can and can't do. NEU are powerless on negotiations, can only represent individually. NEU is not a recognised union for support staff.

Katie – Support staff do not join NEU where GMB are strong in the workplace. It is important that we are a little more aggressive in the way we communicate and ensure we are active in the workplace and have reps. We will share in the WhatsApp group any issues

Robert – The NEU are very organised with Comms and the GMB are not too good with the National comms.

Nick – Stacey and team are aware of this, and we are making appropriate responses – watch this space.

Robert- NEU this topic has been around for a while, and we need to see something

Nick – we need to make sure locally we enforce this, and actions do speak louder than words.

Maria – National need to be seen in the schools – don't rely on the branch. National need to help fund the reps in the schools with secondment as they are

Katie – Members in Kent appreciate the support the Branch offer – chat to Branch officer/Region for further support.

Christine – set boundaries and say no – burnout is real. Stay strong.

Nick thanked everyone for attending. We will set the next meeting.

Christine would like to have the next meeting before 7th July so any learnings can be taken to the National meeting on the 7th July.