

# Britain: Labour government announces privatisation of three more Local Education Authorities

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Private consultants are to be sent into Bradford, Rochdale and Waltham Forest Local Education Authorities (LEA) deemed to have “serious weaknesses” in their provision to schools.

This followed the latest batch of six inspections carried out by the Office for Standards in Education in England (OFSTED). Chris Woodhead, OFSTED chief, and Schools Standards Minister Estelle Morris singled out Bradford in West Yorkshire, saying all of its educational provision should be privatised, apart from the actual schools themselves. The consultants have to provide an action plan within six weeks.

Announcing this latest move to privatise more educational services, Woodhead said, “This report is an indictment of Bradford LEA which does not do enough to avoid using social disadvantage as an excuse for low standards of expectation, and is failing its children miserably.” Morris warned, “In Bradford we are not prepared to accept an option that leaves the LEA in charge of education services,” adding that “most if not all” the services would be put out to tender.

The report on Bradford attacked the LEA for virtually all of its education provision and especially for failing to properly fund schools. Spending on education in Bradford has been run down over a number of years. Since 1995 spending on schools has been below national guidelines (Standard Spending Assessment—SSA). Current expenditure is 6 percent below SSA, and at £2,444 per pupil per year, the overall education budget is lower than the national average of £2,565.

At the time the inspection took place the school system was going through a major reorganisation, leading to the closure of 74 schools and a complete

change in character for a further 145 schools. Both the city's Director of Education and Council leader have accepted OFSTED's recommendations.

Bradford has some of the most deprived areas in Britain. 22.8 percent of primary and 29.6 percent of secondary pupils are entitled to free school meals compared with 18.9 percent and 16.7 percent nationally. In addition, one third of the pupil population are from the Indian subcontinent—Pakistan, India, Bangladesh—with a high percentage of them speaking English as a second language. At the beginning of the 1990s many teachers and support staff were sacked, especially those working with pupils for whom English is a second language.

More private organisations have recently been given official approval to run local education services in England, including Group 4, who provide security and already run some prisons. The government's unstated aim is to privatise the majority of LEAs. In line with this, Morris stressed, “What we want is irreversible change and we will not leave each of these LEAs until we have got that. There will be no slipping back when we have finished.” The government's plan to inspect all 150 LEAs by 2001 has now reached half way. Of the 75 inspected so far, OFSTED has intervened into 15. These include the London boroughs of Hackney, Islington, Southwark, Haringey and Waltham Forest, Walsall, Bristol, Leicester, Sandwell, Doncaster, Sheffield, Rotherham, Leeds, Rochdale and Bradford, all with highly concentrated areas of social deprivation.

The 1998 School Standards and Framework Act provided the mechanism for the government to intervene when an LEA was said to be failing to adequately carry out its duties towards schools. This

has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, under conditions where gross under-funding means that schools have to juggle limited resources and are unable to compensate for the social deprivation that afflicts 45 percent of school-age children.

New figures from the Department for Education (DfEE) show that 2,470 schools—more than 10 percent of the schools in England and Wales—were in deficit last year, as their spending exceeded the funds they had been allocated. In the Chancellor's last budget, one-off payments of between £9,000 and £40,000 that were given directly to schools were being used to pay off debts rather than buy equipment as intended.

In a highly publicised move, Kevin Short, the brother of Labour's International Development Secretary Clare Short, resigned as head teacher of a junior school. A £30,000 deficit at his school meant cutbacks would have to be made. As it is, his school could not afford a full-time caretaker and Short had had to come in at weekends with other volunteers to decorate the school. Another primary school that faces a deficit of £100,000 is considering sacking two senior staff members, since labour costs make up 90 percent of the budget.

With school income related to the size of pupil rolls, competition between schools is intense and a bidding culture is now endemic in the funding system.

The incoming president of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), Michael Brookes, has called for the government's school inspections service to be scrapped. At the NAHT annual conference, Brookes said that the inspection service is the equivalent of the Spanish inquisition—inaccurate and unfair. Inspectors are self-employed and work on short-term contracts from the companies who successfully win inspection contracts through competitive tenders to OFSTED.

But the teaching unions share responsibility for the worsening conditions presently faced by pupils and staff alike, having consistently failed to mount any opposition to years of cuts and eroding working conditions. As increased workloads take their toll, a recent survey showed that teachers in England and Wales are now four times more likely to experience stress at work than people in other professions. The counselling service Teacherline cites OFSTED inspections as a major stress factor. One in five teachers said OFSTED inspections had caused them stress, and

50 percent said they were likely to leave the profession in the next five years. Around 200,000 reported stress due to excessive workload, 85,000 due to aggression from pupils and 58,000 due to aggression from parents in the same period.

Teacherline has taken over 7,000 calls since being established in September last year—around 1,000 a month. Two thirds of these were related to teachers' work. Comparative studies show that one third of calls are work related, rather than involving family or personal issues. Many teachers are now going through the onerous assessment process for Performance Related Pay, which will only add to the tensions and pressures that exist among staff in schools.



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