

## **NASUWT Annual Conference 2021**

### **General Secretary's Address 4 April 2021**

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President. Conference. I am proud and honoured to be addressing you today for the very first time as your General Secretary.

Since taking up my post last year, I have seen first-hand the incredible commitment, passion and dedication of teachers – NASUWT members and lay activists – and our staff who have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic.

Thank you for what you have done and for what you are doing.

There is no job that has ever been more important than teaching and I am proud to lead the only union that is the voice of teachers across the UK, the Channel Islands, Isle of Man, Gibraltar and beyond.

I want to express my thanks to the National Executive and National Officers and to my General Secretary Team for their support throughout the last year.

And I want also to pay tribute to my predecessor, Chris Keates, who stepped down from office last year after many years of dedicated and great service to our Union, and to all those who have come before me in building our Union as the voice of teachers and headteachers.

In the somewhat surreal environment of a virtual Conference, it may be difficult for us to show our appreciation to colleagues as we normally would. But, it is no less heartfelt.

And I know that we would also want to pay tribute to those loved ones, colleagues, friends and members of the NASUWT who we have lost during this past year.

And I want to pay special tribute to our dear colleague and Deputy General Secretary, Gareth Young, who was tragically taken from us last December.

## **Rising to the challenge**

These have been tough times. A global pandemic, emergency legislation, national lockdowns.

But it is how we have responded in these unprecedented times that really matters.

When schools were closed, teachers kept going.

Designing, delivering, innovating; continuing to secure children's education against the odds.

There was no blueprint. No instruction manual. No playbook or training. But we witnessed how you applied your professionalism and creativity to plug the gaps created by the governments' decision to close schools.

And, whilst you were doing that, we also responded.

Ensuring that you had the reassurance of having the Union there beside you; providing information, advice and support, and making the strongest representations on your behalf to employers and to governments.

And that is what we continue to do.

And because of who we are, we have never lost sight of the important issues impacting on your daily work and working conditions – workload, behaviour, pay and your safety at work – as set out again in our Conference Agenda.

Throughout the last 12 months, on your behalf, we have continued to reach out to those employers and governments that were willing to work with us and to use all the means at our disposal to persuade those who were not so willing to deliver the best conditions for teachers, so that you can continue to do the very best for children and young people.

And, Conference, we faced these unprecedented challenges head on, devising new solutions, never losing touch with our ethos and values, securing improvements, and every day, working to deliver on the priorities set by you.

By teachers. For teachers. That is what we are and what we always will be.

And we will always make it our priority to strengthen the NASUWT voice in every school and college workplace, building our resilience as well as our capacity to make the best of the opportunities that come our way.

**And I am deeply grateful to all those teachers who have joined us and all those members who have stepped up into activism during the past year.**

Thousands of you have chosen to become Workplace Representatives, Health and Safety Reps and Equality Officers.

You have been amazing. Truly, the beating heart of our Union!

Building and strengthening our Union, winning more members who recognise that the best place to be is in a union, and even more, to be in *the* Union that is led by teachers for teachers.

And through your actions, many employers have come to recognise the value of working with the NASUWT and that, in order to get through this crisis, we all have to work together.

**And as a Union, we have also made it our priority to be an inclusive Union.**

To see more of our women members, young members, Black members, disabled, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans members becoming involved and stepping up into activism.

Diversity is the health of our Union and it has made us stronger.

And every day we demonstrate our progressive trade union values.

Whether that is campaigning to end sexism and misogyny in the workplace, protecting the rights of pregnant teachers, advocating for family friendly rights and for the rights of disabled and vulnerable teachers at work, campaigning against the exploitation of supply teachers, or tackling all forms of discrimination and in our fight for racial justice and Black Lives Matter, which we will be taking forward following this Conference with our Big Conversation.

**And when I'm asked what does the NASUWT stand for – I say this:**

We stand for each and every one of our members – because it is our members who make us.

We stand for the right of teachers to teach.

We stand, day in day out, to support and advocate for our members – individually and collectively.

We stand for action – action against unfair treatment, abuse, discrimination and injustice at work.

We stand for quality education, a broad and balanced curriculum, and the right of every child to be taught by qualified teachers.

The right of teachers to teach, free from political or other interference in the classroom.

We stand for democracy and the right to freedom of association.

We stand for internationalism – together with fellow teachers in the Philippines, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Turkey, Zimbabwe and around the world – because we know that an injury to any one of us is an injury to all of us.

We stand together against hate and for an education system that promotes equality and social inclusion, as well as teaching for inclusive citizenship and climate justice; and where

young people learn about the historical injustices that continue to drive all forms of prejudice, discrimination and bigotry: racism and xenophobia; religious intolerance; Islamophobia and anti-Semitism; homophobia, biphobia and transphobia; sexism and misogyny; disability discrimination; ageism.

Because we know that united we stand, divided we fall and we will never be bystanders.

And our Union will always stand with our members – never afraid to call out the failures of governments or employers when they refuse to listen to or respect the concerns of teachers.

That is what it means to be NASUWT. Yesterday. Today and tomorrow.

And from this Conference, together, we will be taking forward a renewed agenda and programme that you will determine.

Affirming our values through our actions on behalf of every one of our members.

Working with our members, listening to our members, acting on your concerns – in your workplaces, Local Associations, regionally, nationally and internationally – united in our shared aims and common purpose.

That is what the NASUWT stands for.

### **The pandemic response**

I know from talking with many members across the country, how difficult – personally and professionally – this past year has been.

We may all have been caught in the same storm of the pandemic, but we were not all in the same boat.

For teachers, there was no respite from the storm.

Schools may have closed, but you kept going.

And you kept going despite:

- A catalogue of Government failures
- A litany of Government U-turns
- Delayed decision-making
- Lightweight and confusing guidance, often published at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour giving school leaders no time to prepare
- The refusal by government to acknowledge the risks to teachers of covid transmission in schools
- The many broken promises
- The failure of the test and trace system
- The woeful under-supply of PPE
- The lack of adequate funding to meet schools' covid safety costs
- Exams chaos
- Delays in the provision of free meals and laptops for pupils
- The premature lifting of lockdown restrictions which put lives at risk
- The refusal of Government to publish details of their covid equality impact assessments
- And their wanton disregard of the enforcement measures needed to deliver on their promise that your workplaces would be covid-safe.

Like other key workers, teachers were applauded on the doorstep, but have been treated with contempt by government insisting that teachers' efforts were not worthy of a pay award.

Applauded and yet disparaged for daring to speak the truth about the risks of reopening schools at the height of the storm.

Was it any wonder that, at the height of the pandemic, 85% of the public put their trust in teachers, as opposed to the 15% who said they trusted politicians to tell the truth – putting Government Ministers at the bottom of the veracity league table?

Colleagues – it was you – in spite of the incompetence of government, the criticism, and the stress many of you endured – you continued to put children first.

And we will always work to ensure that your commitment is recognised and rewarded and that your courage and your actions are never forgotten.

And I say again today that we will continue our calls for a full independent public inquiry into the government’s handling of the pandemic and its impacts on teachers and our education system.

### **Children need teachers**

We have been on a rollercoaster these last 12 months – rarely out of the news.

We have become accustomed to new experiences and a new language.

“Lockdowns”? “Shielding”? “Social distancing”? “Furlough”? “Remote education”? “You’re on mute”? Even the concept of “risk assessments” was a revelation for some!

But new experiences and a new language aside, this pandemic has not altered the realities of the importance of education and the centrality of our teachers.

And we have never been deflected from our core purpose of working to keep members safe at work, advancing your interests, and taking action when we needed to on behalf of our members.

And I pay tribute to those many members who have stood together in the past year, taking the ultimate step of industrial action, in the most difficult of circumstances, to defend their jobs, to insist on safe working conditions and to challenge abusive practices by employers or violence at work.

Parents across the country have realised that teaching is far from easy.

After months of school closures and of remote education, one thing has been clear: children need teachers.

This pandemic has reminded us that we cannot replace schools or teachers if we want the best for children.

And as we hopefully begin to emerge from this pandemic, we are determined to take forward your calls for better support for teachers – investment – in pedagogy, in your professional development, in securing better working conditions, pay and rewards – and building capacity within our schools and colleges to enable you to focus on teaching and on pupils' learning.

### **Supporting teachers**

And alongside Government plans for easing lockdown restrictions, we want to see the government's roadmap, not just for the next few months, but a roadmap for exiting the pandemic and securing the longer term recovery.

A roadmap that recognises that the profession and our pupils have already been through a great deal and that acknowledges that many teachers are running on empty.

Ministers cannot stand by and insist that the profession must simply soldier on.

We have already seen the huge toll of the last year on teachers' workloads, as well as on your mental health and wellbeing.

Eighty-one per cent of teachers report they have experienced an increase in workplace stress over the past year and almost half said the job had affected their physical health.

One third of teachers have sought help to deal with the detrimental impacts on their health and wellbeing as a result of the pandemic and the impact of shoddy employer practices.

- The failures to ensure that Covid-safety rules are followed.

- The expectations placed on teachers to carry on teaching in the classroom whilst delivering lessons online to pupils who are self-isolating.
- The massive increases in preparation, marking and assessment burdens.
- And the demands on school leaders having to deal with constant chopping and changing and last-minute decision-making by government.

Ministers must not only listen to the concerns of the profession – they need to act on them.

Listen to teachers' concerns about those employers who have felt emboldened to pursue "business as usual".

Employers taking the "opportunity" of a global health pandemic to threaten teachers with job loss if they refuse to agree detrimental changes to their contractual terms and conditions, whilst at the same time giving priority to building up their unspent reserves or using their funding to pay for costly vanity projects.

Listen to teachers' concerns about the abuse of performance management, appraisal and capability procedures and new methods introduced to monitor teachers to within an inch of their lives.

Listen to teachers' concerns about the lack of support for teachers when faced with violent and disruptive pupil behaviour.

Listen to teachers' concerns about uncaring employers who seek to discipline teachers if they contract Covid or tell teachers they cannot have time off to receive their Covid vaccine jab.

Listen to teachers' concerns about the risks to adults of Covid transmission in schools and the impact of Long Covid, which, as ONS data confirms, the teaching and education employment sector has a high prevalence rate of Long Covid, only second behind workers in health care.

Listen to teachers' concerns about employers who believe they can act with impunity as the government fails to take action to secure compliance with employment and health and safety law and fail to protect and strengthen rights under equalities legislation.

Listen to teachers' concerns about employers using their freedoms to foster grace-and-favour pay practices, the widespread abuses of excessive leadership pay, the secrecy over pay decisions, and the withholding of pay awards and pay progression and widening pay inequality.

Teachers with no guarantee about the pay or pay progression they can expect to receive, however hard they work and however well they perform.

Schools where unlawful discrimination continues to operate under the radar, undetected.

And listen to teachers' concerns too about the exploitative nature of the market in supply teachers, which has resulted in rock-bottom rates of pay for teachers whilst private supply agencies and umbrella companies profit at the expense of schools and the taxpayer.

This is what our members tell us and we will be acting on your concerns.

Because teachers deserve better.

And we say to the government that if you really care, if you really value our profession, then you have a duty to step in and bring these practices to an end once and for all.

And we are also clear in saying to bad employers that where the Government fails to tread, we will step in – as we have done and as we will continue to do in the interests of our members.

And we will never accept business as usual if that means that any one of our members is subject to unfair treatment, discrimination and physical and mental injury at work or has to leave the profession because of the damage that has been inflicted on them.

## **Let teachers teach**

Conference – we know that quality education for pupils can only be achieved if teachers are free to teach and where the walls – the obstacles – that prevent you from doing so, or that inhibit children’s educational progress, are removed, brick by brick.

The last year has revealed to many what our members have known for a long time.

That many families have been plunged into poverty as a result of ruthlessly pursued policies of austerity and that this is having profound consequences for children’s education.

More families on the breadline, without the means to feed their children when schools were closed.

All credit to Marcus Rashford, but it shouldn’t take a footballer to have to tell the government to wake up to the realities of the poverty and deprivation endured by too many children for so long.

Although we live in the world’s fifth largest economy, one fifth of our country lives in poverty.

More than 4 million children living in poverty in the UK. Nine pupils in every class of 30.

Tens of thousands of poorer families are forced to live in substandard accommodation far from their schools or community networks.

Food banks have proliferated – a cause, I am proud to say, we are supporting once again with the Trussell Trust at this Conference.

But the social safety net has been raided by savage budget cuts.

And the policies of austerity have made a desperate situation worse.

A study published by the NHS in July last year found that clinically significant mental health conditions amongst children had risen by 50% compared to three years ago.

A staggering one in six children now have a probable mental health condition.

Last year saw a 35% increase in referrals to children's mental health services, but only a 4% increase in children actually receiving support.

This is the reality that you tell us about – a reality that, unless it is addressed, will continue to have profound and lasting consequences for children, our schools and society for years to come.

And when asked if there is a “real need to cut spending on public services in order to pay off the very high national debt” following the pandemic, more than 60% of the public disagree – because parents and the public know that investment in schools, colleges and other public services is the lifeline for our communities throughout this crisis and beyond.

And parents and the profession are appalled by the misappropriation of public funding intended for children's education which is being siphoned off by greedy individuals and companies.

The Government needs to listen and act on what teachers and parents are saying – not by returning to where we were before the pandemic hit us – but by putting in place a plan that will deliver a better deal for all children.

### **Catch on**

Instead, the Prime Minister talks about the need for children to ‘catch up’ to address lost learning during the last year.

But where is the catch-up programme that is first about remedying the 8% real-terms cuts in total school spending per pupil over the last decade and the 57% reduction in spending on services provided by local authorities?

Where is the remedy to address the real-terms cuts to teachers' pay, which has resulted in the erosion of teachers' salaries by 17% in real terms over the last decade and which continues to contribute to the crisis in teacher morale and retention, with two out of three teachers seriously considering quitting the job?

Let's talk about what catch-up means for the millions of children who have fallen into poverty since 2010.

Let's talk about what catch-up means for children with mental health problems and who are self-harming, or for children with special educational needs and disabilities where specialist targeted support has been pared to the bone.

Let's talk about no child being held back because of their background and where every child, including those from the poorest backgrounds, has access to the opportunities they need to enable them to achieve their potential.

Government needs to stop looking for quick fixes and grabbing media headlines – instead of catch up, they need to catch on to the long-term damage inflicted by their own policies.

Catch on to the need for much greater investment in all those services that will provide the foundation for the education recovery that children and young people need.

The crisis facing many of our young people didn't start with the pandemic, but it has certainly been deepened by it.

The system was not in the best of health before this pandemic struck.

So we should not be seeking to go back to how things were before the pandemic.

If we are to aspire to have the best country for children to grow up in, we will need more than catch-up and recovery.

We need a plan for education renewal.

And we want a recovery, a renewal, that is teacher-led, too.

Creating the best conditions to enable teachers to secure children's learning and development by creating the conditions that let teachers teach.

Backed by trained practitioners delivering a guaranteed entitlement for every child to access mental health services, timely behaviour support and counselling services in every school, building on the fantastic work that is already happening across the country led by bodies like Citizens UK and others.

Teachers and children didn't create this crisis.

And schools shouldn't be left to pick up the pieces left by this pandemic.

And our members must not be coerced into working longer hours or delivering summer schools in order to deliver on the government's short-term fixes.

Teachers' commitment and resilience have been tested to the limit.

They don't need more exhortation and empty words – they need action by government which puts teachers first:

- A credible plan to recruit more teachers and support staff and other children's service professionals.
- A plan to retain and recognise teachers who have dedicated their lives to the job.
- A plan to let teachers teach. A plan to reduce class size.

- A plan to end the long working hours of teachers which continues to drain teaching quality.
- A plan to guarantee every teacher time for professional development as a contractual entitlement throughout their careers.
- A plan to scrap the link between performance and teachers' pay.
- A plan to ensure that school and college employers do the right thing, not their own thing – that your contractual entitlements are fully protected and that there is compliance with employment, health and safety, and equalities laws, and that employers are held properly to account.

We need a bold agenda from government.

An agenda that you, Conference, are helping to set.

And in turn we stand ready to work with any government to deliver on it.

And as we look to the summer, we will continue our efforts to ensure that qualifications and awards are fair to students, but also workable, sustainable and deliverable by our members.

And let's be clear – teachers and school and college leaders must never be made the scapegoats for the failures of governments.

Ministers might repeat the mantra that they will be trusting teachers, not algorithms, but we all know what that means. The public knows what they mean – putting as much distance between ministers and any mess created as a result of their failure to engage meaningfully and fully with the profession.

We want the best for all of our students.

And we know that you will work to do the very best for them.

But it is ministers who must take responsibility and be accountable.

And Ministers must also work with us now to put in place arrangements for next year and beyond that mean that no pupil has to trust to fate, to hope for the best – and that every pupil has an equal opportunity to demonstrate their potential and what they have learned.

In the last year, the pandemic has dominated all of our lives.

But it has not defined us.

As we move forward, we continue to put our values into practice.

Working with your National Executive Members, Local Associations, Workplace Reps and our Regional and National Teams, we are ready to support you.

Member by member. Workplace by workplace. Employer by employer. And always putting your concerns first in all of our representations to government.

And our campaign plan, from this Conference, will take forward the priorities you set which will be front and centre of our work on your behalf.

So join with us and join in. And as we move forward together, let us stand proud, proud of the actions we have taken together.

Proud of what we have achieved.

Building and strengthening our Union.

Setting the agenda. Leading the debate.

Standing up for our members in your workplaces and for the future of the teaching profession.

And proud that even in the toughest of times, we have never faltered, never lost sight of our members or our values, standing up for teachers, at home and abroad, speaking out against injustice against teachers anywhere, advancing the right to quality education for children everywhere.

That is what it means to be NASUWT. Your Union. Proud to be the Teachers' Union.

Thank you.