

UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICES:

The Right to a Good Life

1. Introduction

Some things in life are too important to be left to the market.

When it comes to your health, the opportunity to acquire skills and learn about the world, or being looked after in your old age, a decent society does not allow people's access to depend on their ability to pay.

The labour movement has long upheld that many of the key things in life should be provided collectively, funded out of general taxation and free at the point of use for everyone.

It is the idea that has underpinned our treasured public services ever since Beveridge argued for state provision of "national minimums" for essentials in his report *"Social Insurance and Allied Services."*

Beveridge was concerned with liberating people from the daily struggle for survival that comes with poverty and insecurity.

But free, universal public services aren't just about tackling poverty. They are about enabling us all to lead full lives and realising our potential.

Collectively provided universal public services create shared experiences that bring us together as a society. They strengthen social bonds and contribute to our quality of life in ways economists struggle to measure, but that we know are vital to leading a rich and fulfilling life.

Nor must free, universal public services be limited to the bare essentials we need to stay alive.

Cultural experiences, pleasant surroundings and places and spaces to enjoy leisure time are human needs just as much as food and shelter are.

A rich, contented and rewarding life should not be something exclusively available to those with money to spare.

Our ancestors agreed, which is why they fought for parks, libraries, and other amenities to be provided for the whole community by local councils.

There are other benefits to collective provision. State provision can be more efficient than having lots of fragmented private providers. And when we take providing services out of the hands of the market that means not using tax money to subsidise shareholders.

For all these reasons, universal public services, free at the point of use, will be one of three central pillars of the economic programme of the next Labour Government.

Alongside the other two – structural reform to create good jobs, reduce the cost of living and broaden ownership and democracy, and social security to provide a cash safety net for those who need it – universal public services are how we will create an economy that serves us instead of making us its servants.

An economy that not only reduces the poverty and hardship burgeoning under the Conservatives, but that also gives everyone the opportunity to lead a rich life.

Our 2017 policy document 'Alternative Models of Ownership' made the socialist case for expanding alternatives to capitalist production: co-operatives, municipalism and democratic public ownership.

We argue that not everything in our lives should be treated as a commodity. For example we believe that education is a gift from one generation to another, not a commodity to be bought and sold in the market place.

Here we develop the argument for decommodification further, laying out the case for reducing or eliminating the role of the market in allocating what we use and consume as well as how it is produced.

That case is not a new one, though it has not been made enough recently.

For decades, public universalism fell out of favour as the political pendulum swung towards means-testing and privatisation.

More recently, austerity has shredded our public sector and is posing an existential threat to some public services.

Against this backdrop, it is high time the case for universal public services is revisited.

But we want to do more that defend what we have. There is no inherent limit to where the principle of “free at the point of use” should extend, other than where we as a society set it, and the next Labour Government will extend the scope of our ambition in unprecedented ways.

We have been helped in this by a recent groundbreaking report¹ by academics at University College London, who make the case for an enhanced role for what they call ‘Universal Basic Services’ in the economy of the future. We owe a debt of gratitude to the report’s authors for sparking an important debate on what services we provide free at the point of use.

1 *Social prosperity for the future: A proposal for universal basic services* https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/igp/sites/bartlett/files/universal_basic_services_-_the_institute_for_global_prosperity_.pdf

The title is new, but the principle is the same as that found in Beveridge: our socialism means leaving nobody behind and denying nobody the right to a good life.

The rest of this document lays out how, with the essentials of a good life produced and enjoyed in common, we can tackle poverty while building a good life for everyone that lives in the UK. Section 2 describes what we mean by free public services. Section 3 puts the current debate in historical context. Section 4 looks at the areas where Labour has already committed to extending free public services. Section 5 concludes and looks to the future.

2. The Case for UBS

With Britain reeling from nearly a decade of austerity, the need to revive the principle of a socially-guaranteed national minimum is greater than it has been since at least Beveridge's time.

In a damning report earlier this year, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights found that poverty has become systematic under this Government. He attributed this to the brutal unpicking of "the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War"² which has meant the UK's social safety net "has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos."³

Against this backdrop there is an urgent need to reassert the role of the state in guaranteeing a universal safety net and to re-establish collectivism and solidarity as the principles that bind our society together and guarantee a good life for all.

Our purpose here is not merely to defend what is left of our deteriorating public services, but to inspire a new imagining of our public realm and set a new ambition for where the principles of universalism and collectivism can be extended.

Our interest in this topic is informed by the looming threats of automation and climate change, and the role that UBS could play in helping us to address these major societal challenges.

The ONS has said that 1.5 million workers in Britain are at high risk of losing their jobs to automation. It is impossible to know exactly how automation will unfold, but the authors of *Social prosperity for the future* argue for UBS as a way of guaranteeing people a basic standard of living in a future in which work cannot be relied on to provide a liveable income.

2 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48354692>

3 Ibid

There is no doubt now that keeping planetary warming within limits necessary for continued human habitation will require transformational change of an unprecedented scale and pace. Such radical change can only be delivered through collective action and UBS may have a key role to play in delivering the rapid and mass behavioural change needed. For example, universally free public transport could be a socially just, efficient and effective way of ending our car dependency.

To all these ends, this section makes the case for UBS through an exploration of each letter in the acronym, asking why universalism? What services are “basic”? And how should these services be provided?

Why universalism?

As section three sets out in more detail, the post-war period was the heyday of universalism. But the period since the 1980s has seen a resurgence of means-testing as resources allocated to social policy became scarcer and the pressure to confine them to the neediest accordingly greater.

The principled argument for universalism focuses not just on improving people’s material well-being, but on social inclusion and establishing all citizens as equal before the state. If access to certain goods and services is essential to participation in society, then access to those goods and services should be guaranteed to all on the basis of citizenship not income.

The experience of means-testing since the 1980s has also strengthened a number of pragmatic arguments for universalism which, somewhat paradoxically, suggest that universal provision may be the most effective way of meeting the material needs of those most in need.

As advocates of universalism predicted, targeting encouraged stigmatisation, with claimants characterised as “undeserving” or “dependent” and contrasted with “hardworking families” who don’t claim. Evidence of this ranges from the rise of “poverty porn,” which demonises the poor in popular culture, to the fact that the public consistently and dramatically overestimate the scale of benefit fraud.⁴ The effect is in itself unjust and may discourage people from claiming what they are entitled to. Targeting also brought greater levels of complexity and bureaucracy, which leads to people claiming or receiving less than their entitlements. Some estimates find that £20bn of means-tested benefits are going unclaimed because claimants do not know what they are entitled to or are discouraged by complex and intrusive assessment processes.⁵

Universal access can help to “lock in” and protect public services from cuts. Whereas stigmatisation has gone hand in hand with the erosion of public support for certain types of benefit, universalism not only reduces stigmatisation but expands the group of beneficiaries, thereby entrenching public support for public services in the electorate.

4 Surveys “consistently show that the average person believes that around one quarter to one third of claims/spending is fraudulent” compared to DWP data showing that 0.3%-4.1% of spending is due to fraud and other data showing that between 1.9%-10.0% of claims are fraudulent http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39196/bsa34_full-report_fin.pdf p. 15

5 <https://www.entitledto.co.uk/blog/2018/december/over-20-billion-still-unclaimed-in-means-tested-benefits/>

Of course, universalism and targeting are not exclusive. In some cases, it may be desirable to top up a universalist commitment with more targeted support for those most in need.⁶ In other cases, there may be good policy reasons to target access at particular groups. For example, free TV licenses and bus passes have been targeted at the elderly because they are both ways of reducing isolation to which elderly people are particularly vulnerable. In yet more cases, such as tuition fees, an entitlement is universal but take-up is not.

What counts as “basic”?

From Beveridge right through to *Social prosperity for the future*, universal access to free at the point of use public services has been most associated with goods and services seen as necessary or essential to human existence. However, while a useful guiding principle, this focus on essential or basic goods can only be that: a guiding principle.

It cannot be more because there is no scientific or objective answer to the question “what is basic?” Human beings have cultural and emotional needs as well as physical ones. Full citizenship, participation in society and the ability to lead a full life depend on more than staying alive. They depend on access to shared cultural experiences, meaningful leisure pursuits, and the ability to understand and be part of civic life. That these cultural needs can be just as valued as more mundane necessities like food and shelter is evident in the huge controversy surrounding the closure of public libraries under the Conservatives’ austerity programme and in the entrenched

6 One term suggested for this is “proportionate universalism”: see <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report-pdf.pdf>.

popularity of free access to museums and galleries introduced by the last Labour government.

What is considered essential changes both over time and across different cultures or societies. In the UK, it was considered a luxury to have a television in one's home, whereas by the 1970s it was commonplace. In the 1980s, mobile phones were a rare novelty even in the richest and most developed countries in the world; nowadays, numbers of mobile phone subscriptions exceed total population in some of the poorest countries in the world. As well as reflecting the breadth of human need, UBS must therefore keep pace with social and technological progress.

Ultimately, just as the question of what is 'basic' to citizenship or essential to the good life is a social question, so what goods and services are most suited to universal public provision is something that must be decided democratically.

We would add to this the rule of thumb that public provision is most appropriate for goods and services whose quality is objective and not a matter of personal taste. When it comes to health, most people want the same thing: access to the best available medicine delivered in a compassionate and professional manner. For goods like food or clothing, however, as soon as provision reaches above a basic level, different people will start to have wildly different tastes, preferences and desires and the public sector is less equipped to cater for these needs.

Finally, the word 'basic' should not be used to constrain service provision – to imply that the state should limit itself to a minimal level of rudimentary provision. Instead, 'basic' best describes how services should be seen: as something human beings are entitled to – services that humans should be able to take for granted.

How should these services be provided?

In recent literature, UBS has often been counterposed to a universal basic income. The UCL Report, for example, argues that UBS is a more cost-effective way of guaranteeing everyone access to the necessities of life than cash payments are. We believe there is a role for both universal basic services and universal and targeted cash payments in a progressive welfare system, and consider universal basic income and social security in parallel strands of policy work.

For certain goods direct provision by the state has advantages that cash payments do not. It is true that an entitlement to a “national minimum” for a particular good or service could, in principle, be guaranteed through a cash benefit (or voucher or insurance system) rather than through direct state provision. Students of neoclassical economics will have been taught the so-called Second Welfare Theorem which says, broadly speaking, that any desired allocation can be achieved by giving people a transfer and then allowing the market to take its course. Assuming that the cost of universal access was covered by the state through general taxation, why would it matter if everyone received the national minimum as a cash payment rather than in kind?

One reason is that a national minimum may not be enough to cover need. How much health or social care someone needs varies widely over the course of one’s life and from person to person in ways that are unpredictable. Given this, if everyone were given an equal cash payment the outcome would be unequal as those with high needs would be unable to cover the cost of their care.

Another reason is efficiency. One has only to look at the US health system to see the dangers of for-profit private provision. When

healthcare is provided for profit there is a huge incentive to over-treat or to prioritise the most lucrative treatments. This creates inefficiencies and channels resources towards where the money is rather than towards need.

The final reason is that inequality is more likely to emerge whenever cash is the medium. This is because the wealthy are likely to top up their guaranteed national minimum to purchase better quality services. This risks creating a stratified system of provision and undermining the solidarity and principle of equal access for all citizens that a national minimums are supposed to create.

It is also important that the public sector is the provider of those services and not private companies. For the last forty years, the dominant view was that introducing private companies and market competition to public services would have a disciplining effect that would drive efficiency improvements. However, the internal market for the NHS, academisation of schools and widespread outsourcing are creating a growing body of evidence that creeping privatisation of public services has been counter-productive.

Quality has been eroded due to cost cutting and fragmentation. "Efficiency" gains have mostly not materialised and, where they have, they have come at the expense of workers. Perhaps most worrying, however, is that the involvement of private providers has brought with it a cultural shift as profits and margins increasingly take precedence over social purpose.

Attempts to replicate the market in public services usually involves breaking services down into discrete, measurable outputs, and setting targets for those outputs that public sector workers are expected to meet (think hospital waiting lists or SAT results). This puts enormous pressure on public sector

workers and creates perverse incentives to channel resources into meeting the target in ways that doesn't improve the service and may even detract from it. For example, school league tables based on SATs results have encouraged schools to "teach to the test" and neglect areas of the curriculum that aren't examined. Those aspects of public services that are not readily broken down into discrete or measurable functions become downgraded and underprovided for, as has happened with preventative public health measures and the educational needs of children with SEND.

The end result is to erode the public service ethos – the combination of professional integrity and commitment to serving society – that brings people into these professions in the first place. This ethos is a much more effective driver of standards in public services, but only if the intrinsic value of the work is not corrupted by extrinsic metrics.

In sum, it is not enough or acceptable for universal basic services to be subcontracted to some other provider to deliver. When the state delegates or contracts-out these functions, the trend is away from universal provision – as costs are cut, targets are drawn up, and services are broken down. And something important is lost: an ethos that ensures these services are regarded as basic and universal and too important to be contaminated by commercial self-interest.

3. The History of UBS and the Labour Movement

The fight for essentials and desirables to be provided free of charge is one as old as society itself – taking any number of forms, from the militant trade union movement which laid the foundation of the welfare state in Norway to the children’s breakfast programmes of the Black Panther Party in the USA.

Universal free services delivered by the state, available to all, have been a major theme in the struggles of the labour movement and the Labour Party throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Progress has not been linear, with opponents cutting and qualifying provision of these services, often privatising or turning to means-testing to hamper the realisation of the ideal. The trade union movement has fought campaigns for universal basic services, and sometimes provided them itself for members and the wider working-class community: miners’ welfares, institutes and libraries.

In 1918, Clause IV of the Labour Party’s constitution famously pledged “to secure for the producers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.” This referred to entitlements as “service[s]” and pressed the Labour Party to find “the most equitable distribution” of the fruits of industry.

Co-author of Clause IV Sidney Webb's 1918 pamphlet, *Labour and the New Social Order: A Report on Reconstruction*, set out a vision for the Party in the aftermath of the First World War that included "the universal enforcement of a national minimum".⁷ It noted that the "first principle of the Labour Party – in significant contrast with those of the Capitalist System, whether expressed by the Liberal or by the Conservative Party, is the securing to every member of the community, in good times and bad alike (and not only to the strong and able, the well-born or the fortunate), of all the requisites of healthy life and worthy citizenship." What would later be concretely delivered as services are well summarised as the "requisites of healthy life and worthy citizenship".

The policy pamphlet *Labour and the Nation*,⁸ published in 1928 after being agreed by Annual Conference, boldly stated that Labour, "unlike other Parties, is not concerned with patching the rents in a bad system, but with transforming Capitalism into Socialism". Identifying the liberating power of freedom from want, *Labour and the Nation* pledged that Labour would "extend rapidly and widely those forms of social provision – education, public health, housing, pensions, the care of the sick, and maintenance during unemployment – in the absence of which the individual is the sport of economic chance and the slave of his [sic] environment."⁹

Labour will, the document said, "direct its policy to bringing within the reach of all the opportunities of physical health, personal decency and comfort, and intellectual culture, which hitherto

7 <https://pdcrodas.webs.ull.es/anglo/LabourPartyLabourAndTheNewSocialOrder.pdf>.

8 <http://palmm.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau%3A4340>.

9 *Ibid*, at p. 16.

have been confined to a minority.”¹⁰ While the emphasis was clearly on the essentials, the horizon was already set to include comfort and intellectual culture so that these opportunities were no longer “confined to a minority.” Defending advances already made, “the Labour Party regards such services, defective as they still are, as among the most important additions made in the last half-century to the real wealth of the community, and expenditure devoted to their wise extension, not as a liability, but as one of the most precious of national assets.”¹¹

Education was a priority: Labour “will work for such an extension and improvement of the educational system as may bring within the reach of all children, irrespective of the income or occupation of their parents, the forms of education provision best adapted to cultivate their varying powers and to meet their differing requirements”.¹²

The language of the time was of “civilisation for all”¹³ with emphasis placed on the role of local authorities in delivering these services, referring in particular to “provision of medical care before and after child birth”,¹⁴ as well as a “democratic system of education.”¹⁵

After the MacDonald administration expanded the services provided by local authorities, the 1935 programme of the Labour Party, *For Socialism and Peace*, continued to press for healthcare to be offered to all as a universal basic service. It wanted “medical discovery” to be used “to the full in the service of the nation”. “All

10 Ibid, at p. 35.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid, at p. 38.

13 Ibid, at p. 53.

14 Ibid, at p. 55.

15 Ibid, at p. 56.

health functions will be taken away from Poor Law control,” *For Socialism and Peace* declared, “and the hospital must be greatly extended.” It talked of a “State Health Service ... with provision for specialist and other forms of treatment”, so that “[i]ndividual poverty” is “not ... a barrier to the best that medical science can provide.” The Labour Party made clear that this could not be achieved through national health insurance; instead, the direct delivery of healthcare as a service to all was required.¹⁶

While the Beveridge Report of 1942 was focused on social insurance, it was also concerned with “allied services” that could secure freedom of want. Alongside proposals for unifying social insurance and extending social insurance into new areas (such as a ‘universal funeral grant’),¹⁷ it of course recommended a “national health service for prevention and for cure of disease and disability by medical treatment”, with a further purpose of “rehabilitation.”¹⁸ The health service was viewed as covering dental treatment, nursing and midwifery.

The interest of national politicians in a national health service was inspired by successful schemes set up and run by local working-class communities, most famously the Tredegar Medical Aid Society. Covering thousands of people in the working-class South Wales community, the Society showed what could be achieved through collective provision.

Labour’s 1945 manifesto, *Let us Face the Future*, committed to establishing a national health service. “[T]he best health services should be available free for all,” the manifesto proclaimed. It added: “money must no longer be the passport to best

16 <https://www.sohealth.co.uk/1934/09/14/for-socialism-and-peace/>

17 <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.275849/page/n65> at p. 65.

18 *Ibid.*, at p. 158.

treatment.”¹⁹ That same manifesto also made the case for a food service as had been available during the War: “A Labour Government,” it pledged, “will keep the new food services, such as the factor canteens and British restaurants, [and] free and cheap milk for mothers and children.”²⁰ This was not quite universal free food provision but was underpinned by similar principles to the establishment of the new National Health Service. £465 million was set aside for spending on food in the 1949 budget.²¹

After the years of the Attlee Government, there were continued references to universal basic services through the 1950s and 1960s. In particular, there was a focus on how costs had crept in to services that were notionally universal. The 1964 Labour Party manifesto, *The New Britain*, spoke of the “burden of prescription charges in the health service.”²² It also discussed leisure as service to which access is fundamental. “[T]he Government has a duty,” the manifesto said, “to ensure that leisure facilities are provided and that a reasonable range of choice is maintained.”²³

Of course, through these years, a range of intellectuals and other commentators called for the delivery of further free public services. Perhaps most notably, R.H. Tawney advocated for a social wage – noting that living standards depend not just on wages at work, but also “on the social income which they receive as citizens”, in the form of free public services.²⁴ Tawney

19 <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1945/1945-labour-manifesto.shtml>.

20 Ibid.

21 Tony Cliff, Donny Gluckstein, and Charlie Kimber, *The Labour Party: A Marxist History* (Bookmarks Publications, 2018) at p. 218.

22 <http://labourmanifesto.com/1964/1964-labour-manifesto.shtml>.

23 Ibid.

24 Anna Coote, ‘Investment in Public Services is an Investment in Social Infrastructure’, online at <https://neweconomics.org/search/author/anna-coote>.

himself had been a consistent advocate of services such as free secondary education, a cause he took up in his 1922 book 'Secondary Education for All', and one which had helped pave the way for the 1944 Education Act.

Feminist labour movement campaigns also repeatedly called for free access to contraception and abortion through these years: the Working Women's Charter called for free local authority day nurseries and family planning clinics.²⁵ In 1974 the NHS Reorganisation Act incorporated family planning into the NHS, making contraceptive advice and prescribed supplies free of charge regardless of age or marital status.²⁶ Labour movement campaigns recognised how labour power is shaped deeply by activities outside the formal economy, including care, the activities of non-workers, and childbirth. The campaigns highlighted the important connections between struggles inside and outside the formal workplace, reinforcing the insights of social reproduction theorists.

The February 1974 manifesto called for an expansion of the NHS (including an abolition of prescription charges), and an expansion of the education service through nationwide nursery schools.²⁷ Later that same year, the October manifesto spoke about a "right to education", a new way of articulating the commitment to education as a universal basic service.²⁸

The ensuing Conservative era hacked away and hollowed out public services, removing some services from public ownership

25 http://www.historyandpolicy.org/img/news/uploads/wwcharter_conference_info.pdf

26 <https://www.fpa.org.uk/factsheets/history-family-planning-services>.

27 <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1974/Feb/1974-feb-labour-manifesto.shtml>.

28 <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1974/Oct/1974-oct-labour-manifesto.shtml>.

and putting pressure on (or directly ending) free provision of services. Prescription charges were raised following the June 1979 Budget.²⁹ The introduction of competition, within public services such as health and education, and sometimes with the government, justified charges being imposed for essential services – as citizens were increasingly regarded as consumers. This way of viewing public services cast a long shadow over the years to follow, contributing to the introduction of tuition fees in 1998. The encouragement of for-profit provision, including in the NHS, often pulled away from incentives to provide services universally.

The austerity of Conservative and Liberal Democrat governments since 2010 has further dismantled a series of free public services, or increased costs of previously free services. Commentators have described the “creeping privatisation” of parks, previously in most cases free and accessible to all.³⁰ Multiple analysts have observed the rise of hidden costs in public education.³¹ Tuition fees have skyrocketed. TV licences, previously free for over 75s, will no longer be free from 1 June 2020, affecting at least three million people.³² The rollout of Universal Credit has affected the entitlement (also not universal) to free school meals, removing access for up to 100,000 children.³³

29 See <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/66525/1/Binder1.pdf>.

30 <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/31/londons-parks-accused-of-creeping-privatisation-of-public-spaces>.

31 See, for example, <https://theconversation.com/hidden-costs-of-state-education-are-stigmatising-poorer-pupils-33499>.

32 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/jun/10/bbc-confirms-plans-to-make-over-75s-pay-licence-fee>.

33 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/free-school-meals-children-miss-out-government-threshold-universal-credit-ifs-institute-fiscal-a8288976.html>.

This is no accident on behalf of the political right. An aversion to the state, coupled with hostility towards taxation, has given rise to a tendency to seek to restrict or eliminate state provision of free, universal basic services. Support for market-based provision of services has also made it harder to guarantee universal provision. And conservatism has favoured a caution towards the extent of services deemed to be part of a rich and flourishing communal life.

4. UBS in Labour's Programme

As discussed in Section 3, Labour has led the way in expanding universal free services at the UK political level. Their expansion has not always progressed smoothly, and at times has been rolled back.

The next Labour government is committed to strengthening existing public services and expanding universal free public services further. This section highlights some areas where we have already indicated new policies – or, at least, a direction of travel. It should not be considered a final word, or Labour's view on the limits of free public provision, but a snapshot at a moment in time.

Health and Social Care

The National Health Service is the most obvious example of how universal free services have been built into the framework of British society, but its boundaries and density have been contested since the start. Aneurin Bevan, the architect of the NHS, famously resigned in protest at the imposition of charges for dentistry and glasses, warning of a slippery slope.

In more recent times, charges for GP appointments have been floated, and provision of services by private companies expanded. Attempts to force healthcare to resemble consumer goods, where people have complicated sets of preferences about choices, lie behind attempts to introduce markets.

Social care was excluded from the National Health Service from the start and, at present, is only available to those who pass a stringent means test.

Labour will expand universal services to include personal social care free at the point of use for those over 65, including help with personal hygiene, continence, diet, mobility, counselling, simple

treatments and personal assistance to perform normal daily activities.

This reflects our belief that a dignified life is as important as a healthy life, and neither should be denied to older people because of inability to pay.

Labour's National Care Service, modelled on the National Health Service, will give personal care to those who need it free of any means testing.

Education: Early Years

How a society cares for pre-school children is a reflection of that society's commitments and priorities: how much it invests in making sure that good quality early years education is available to all, regardless of a child's social background. It can also be seen as a reflection of how much society values women, who in the absence of available childcare, are likely to undertake it unpaid on top of – or instead of – working.

Labour has promised free, universal childcare for all 2-, 3- and 4-year olds, for 30 hours a week, as part of a radical shift to a graduate-led workforce and supply-side funding model. In addition to the universal free entitlement, we have also promised a subsidised system for additional hours, free for the least well off and with even those on the highest incomes paying no more than £4 per hour.

At present the Government's "free childcare" entitlement is only available to children whose parents work – which covers only around 40% of two-year-olds. Furthermore, while complex rules and underfunding mean that many parents are not getting the childcare they were promised. It is far from a universal service.

Labour's plan for free childcare without means-testing is a reminder that what is understood to be 'basic' can change over time – including through government action. Labour's commitment to a high-quality workforce shows again that calling a service 'basic' is not an excuse for poor quality: it is an indication of how important a service is to the good functioning of individuals and society.

Education: Schools, Sixth Forms, Further and Higher Education

Universal free education up to (gradually increasing) secondary school age has existed in England and Wales for over a century, but previously free education for older children and adults has increasingly come under attack.

At the 2017 General Election, Labour committed to ending the system of tuition fees for university students in England, and making further education free at the point of use. Post-school education should be free because it is society as a whole that benefits and, if individuals benefit too, they should contribute more to the system through progressive taxation.

Providing this service free also avoids other injustices: such as crippling student debt, which can cause persistent stress and anxiety – and affect people's life chances and choices.

It represents a continued expansion of the level of education that society deems worthy of support.

Buses

Nobody should be prevented from getting to hospital, work, a job interview or the shops because they can't afford public transport. Nobody should be stuck after a night out because they cannot

pay their own way home. And public transport will be even more important as we try to transition away from dependence on cars.

Social prosperity for the future recommended free local transport, taken to be covered by buses, and Labour has announced an important step in that direction. Retired people already enjoy free bus travel and we announced in 2018 that we would extend that to young people – 25 and below.

Bus travel is not just an environmentally friendly form of transport. It is not just a way to get from one place to another. On buses we rub shoulders, often literally, with others. It is a space for small acts of generosity: seats being given up for people more in need. It is a space where we all learn, and practise, what it means to live in a community.

Free School Meals

Social prosperity for the future suggested food as a universal basic service, though only a minimum provision expected to be taken up by a few of the most hard-up in society.

For young children, some of whom have been reported as having to scavenge in bins in recent years of austerity, a nutritious healthy meal in the middle of the day is essential to both wellbeing and learning, and Labour announced in 2017 that we would bring in universal free school meals for primary school children. Universal free school meals remove stress and shame for children and parents alike. They allow children to focus on their learning, and their development as members of a community.

Libraries, parks, and general local government

Many free at the point of use amenities were developed by local authorities: local parks, libraries, lidos and swimming baths included. Austerity has ripped the heart out of many, with libraries being particularly hard hit.

Books should not only be available to those who can afford to spend money in bookshops. Generations of young people have learned to read in council libraries. Council libraries are spaces of sharing and education – places that allow one book to circulate throughout a community, expanding imaginations along the way.

Parks and other leisure spaces are fundamental for the exercise people need to maintain basic health. But they are also spaces where members of a community can meet one another: while they watch their children play or while they share a basketball court. People should not have to pay to access, or enjoy, these public spaces.

When we put local government on a sustainable footing, we believe that will enable councils to restore free-to-use services which have been lost over recent years.

5. Conclusion

Over the course of the coming decades, it is our hope that society's vision of what services ought to be universal and basic will continue to expand. The labour movement and the Labour Party have clawed back services that have been at risk of becoming commodified in the past. That movement, and our Party, must maintain that determined sense of direction and overcome the different barriers thrown in our path. The campaign for universal basic services has always been part of a bigger struggle between labour and capital. The labour movement, and our Party, must maintain our fight to achieve the society based upon social justice we aspire to create.

At times people's imagination has been constricted by the myths and mantras of neoliberalism. A further task of the labour movement and the Labour Party is to widen our own imagination, so that we are able to strive to demand ever higher standards for what counts as a rich and meaningful life.

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