

POLICY WATCH

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Education and training feature heavily in the Government's latest post-recession recovery plan

'*Building Britain's Future*' is a slogan that the Government has been running with for much of this year. It has an obvious resonance, one that encourages spirits to rise above current difficulties to a more hopeful future. It was used to headline the Budget a couple of months ago and was used again at the start of this week to front another set of important policy announcements.

There were three announcements, two were clear, one less so. The two clear announcements were firstly the Government's latest 120+ page recovery plan for a better post-recession Britain, "*one that's fairer, more prosperous and sustainable*" and no doubt plenty more besides. This was immediately dubbed an election Manifesto for what *The Independent* gleefully pointed out looks like being "*the longest election campaign in recent history.*" And the second was the Draft Legislative Programme, the list of Bills the Government intends to introduce in this final session of Parliament before the general election. 11 in all including the inevitable Education Bill which this time is needed to legislate for commitments in the recent Schools White Paper. It resides under the title of the '*Improving Schools and Safeguarding Children Bill.*'

The announcement that was less clear was about the proposed postponement of the next Spending Review until after the general election.

Spending Reviews are important because they set out a Government's cash volumes, priorities and targets for public spending Depts over the coming three years. The current Spending Review period is coming to an end and the Government would normally complete the next one this year but there are two problems this time: a dire economic situation and an impending election. Although the postponement of this Review had been suspected for some time, Lord Mandelson's confirmation of this on the radio earlier in the day seemed to suggest that the decision was already in the bag. This thus bypassed the Chancellor, who would normally make such an announcement, and instantly aroused the suspicions of the Opposition. "*This is an attempt to cover up the truth about Labour cuts*" claimed David Cameron already smarting from the Mr 10% jibe of Labour MPs over his alleged cuts.

To add to its woes, the governor of the Bank of England last week urged the Government to reduce the "*extraordinary*" levels of public borrowing. While this week, the OECD concluded that in the UK, "*recovery is likely to be slow and unemployment is expected to climb significantly*" and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported a fall in GDP of 4.9%, the biggest for 60 years.

All of which made for a difficult launch pad for the Government as it laid out its recovery plan for the country on Monday. "*Less a vision, more a set of policy*

prescriptions," the FT complained and there are certainly plenty of these. 59 what are called "*key deliverables*" are listed for the coming year and a further 42 for the following years up to 2020. They're not all new, the raising of the compulsory participation learning age for young people being a case in point. Nor are they all directed at the world of education and training. After all as the plan says, "*our first and most urgent priority is to clean up our politics.*"

That said, 14 of the 59 deliverables for the coming year and 11 of the 42 for the years that follow do concern the world of education and skills. The interesting point is just what status these deliverables are intended to have: ambitions, targets, entitlements, guarantees or? The Government retained the use of Public Service Agreement targets in its recent Budget although it spearheaded them with a new overarching objective of '*helping people and businesses through the downturn sooner and stronger.*' But it now seems to be moving towards the use of entitlements and guarantees as exemplified in the Schools White Paper the following day. The Government claims that granting consumers guarantees ensures standards in public service will be raised; the Opposition claim it's a device by a cash strapped Government to avoid committing funds where needed.

Such debates will rumble on into the next election. For the moment, these are some of the key deliverables in the recovery plan for the world of education and skills for the coming year. Some are more familiar than others but collectively they set out the Government's priorities in this area.

- Starting next January, every 16-25 year old who has been unemployed for a year will be required to take up a guaranteed job, work experience or training place funded through a £1bn Future Jobs Fund designed to create 100,000 'community' jobs for young people. This was the first announcement read out by the Prime Minister when he stood up in Parliament to introduce the plan and is further evidence of the political desire not to allow a generation of abandoned young people to be created as happened in the past
- A guarantee of a sixth form or apprenticeship place this year for all school leavers, funded through the additional funds put in at the last Budget and building on the successful September Guarantee
- Every young person to give "*at least 50 hours of service to their community in their teenage years.*" Funding for this was also identified in this year's Budget for a series of pilots to start this September
- A '*radical*' expansion of federations of schools, trust and Academies; part of the chain gang model of school improvement included in the White Paper
- A new set of guarantees to parents around '*an individually tailored education for their child(ren).*' Details were spelt out in the Schools White Paper and include personal tuition, specialist help and "*qualifications that suit every child's strength whether practical or academic*" though quite how these fit in with prescribed frameworks is less clear

Ministers will be holding meetings through the summer "*to explain more about the plan and consult with members of the public.*" If you're not going on holiday...

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