



CEPEO manifesto – focus groups final report

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Public First ran two focus groups to test the ideas within the CEPEO manifesto, and the broader concept of ‘equalising opportunity’, in March 2023.

Group composition was (for both groups) 6 participants, mixed socio economic status and mixed gender. The groups consisted of three former Conservative voters and three other voters in 2019, all of whom now say that they don’t know how they would vote. One group was made up of parents of primary school aged children (in York) and one group was made up of parents of secondary aged children (in Hastings).

For each group, we tested broad views on education, followed by a selection of ideas from CEPEO manifesto, followed by a general sense of prioritisation of ‘equalizing opportunity’ as a concept. In the Hastings group, we tested: keeping of exams as a primary metric of accountability; prioritising young people for Apprenticeships; greater accountability for post-16 providers; a social mobility scorecard for universities; and entry and pay audit gaps by background. In the York group, we tested: simplifying childcare subsidies; a campaign around early maths support for parents; greater parental communication around absences; and admissions reform

Overall conclusions

- *These two groups – predominantly white, a mix of middle class and working class group of swing voters in swing constituencies – were on the whole broadly indifferent to concepts of equalising opportunity.*
- *Whilst they were sympathetic to the abstract concept of equalising opportunity and to try and shift outcomes, they committed to this only weakly, didn’t hold fast to it in policy specifics, and on the whole (most strongly) felt it was likely to be unachievable.*
- *The most popular policies were around: maths support for parents; auto enrolment for childcare subsidies and early years reform; and apprenticeship prioritising for young people.*
- *More complex policies, especially around social mobility scorecards and pay audits, were largely met with incomprehension.*
- *Perhaps unsurprisingly, both groups also raised funding for schools, and support for teachers.*



Specific findings - Hastings

On the specific ideas tested, the apprenticeships policy resonated the most and the group was strongly in favour of prioritising young people and placing more bureaucracy on companies to focus on this and publish it. Overall, people were cautious about exams but also cautious about any ways of moving away from exam-based entry to HE or to the professions. More complicated CEPEO proposals, especially around contextual admissions and social mobility scorecards, baffled them but they were moderately opposed in their discussions.

The group were broadly sceptical about exams – drawn largely from personal experience – but were easily persuaded by counter prompts about unreliability of teacher assessment, especially around favouritism

- On an initial run through, everyone in the group expressed scepticism of exams
- *“I think they’re completely the wrong time [of age]. my eldest who went through his GCSEs, last summer.....he went into adolescence, and having been quite an academic kid, and getting on quite well with anything, just switched off completely....just before sitting as GCSEs, he literally just had reached the point where he just couldn't be bothered with it anymore. And it's very interesting seeing him sort of a year later, just now being able to get into the mindset of that thing again now. And yet, for a year and a half to two years, he just wasn't in the right place for exams. And it's a shame because he can do them.”* (C2 man, 60s)
- *“it's a lot for a young child to take on. You know, from the age of primary school, they were doing exams, and it's crazy to me to put that pressure on a young child. And [the school], they were pretty much saying at 16. If you don't do well, at this, it's the end. You have to do well at this. And it's all on this one day. I know it's not because it's coursework and stuff. But that that is a concern. And I'm constantly saying to my daughter, don't worry, it's not the end of the world. Even if you don't do well in school in general, it's not the end of the world. But to put so much pressure on an exam, at what is especially at that age a very stressful age anyway....”* (C2 man, 50s)
- *“I've got a 16 year old, who's going through this at the moment, and I totally relate [to the scepticism]. I know the capability is there, but it's just like all life has just been sucked out of him. And he's so tired, like, always tired. I spot him headfirst in books on tables. Literally. He's left phones downstairs and gone to bed. Exams are just not for every child. There's some children that I really do excel in exams, but there's a majority of children that really don't and it's it honestly saps the life out of them. And actually it's not very nice to watch as an adult because you can't turn around and say just do your best and, and they're not important because then you're worried that they're not going to take it seriously enough. And it's a double edged sword. It's really hard.”* (C2 woman, 40s)
- But when prompted with a counter argument about the unreliability of teacher assessment, everyone switched positions.

- “yeah, that sometimes could happen. So I know that sometimes teachers and students don't get on. So it could have a real effect on their grades” (C2 woman, 40s)
- “there's obviously some subjects where it doesn't really matter whether your teacher likes you, like maths, you get it right or wrong. But it's the more judgmental ones, isn't it? It's the ones when you've got actually got to consider what some of the work was like. [Teacher bias] is always possible” (C2 man, 50s)
- “I've got no point of reference apart from a personal one. I did quite well in exams but in PE but I wasn't one of the sporty ones. So I got a C and I was furious. But for that exact reason, because the teachers are notorious for it [bias]. They liked the sporty kids, the kids that are in the Sussex leagues and stuff. So they got better grades. I'd never really thought about this for my daughter, if I'm honest.” (B man, 30s)

The group were very strongly pro Apprenticeships in general, including prioritising or reserving elements of the levy for young people and reporting on this, even at the cost of greater employer bureaucracy. One woman discussed (bravely) her scepticism of them, which we think was generally acknowledged as well

- “I'm personally very keen on them....I came through that period where initially it was a very small amount of people went to university. And then throughout the time when I was at school, and then when I went to university, it was very much bumped up to the idea that about 50% of people went to university...I just think there should be a better balance with kids that either don't want to go into university or are not academically suited to going to university. There should be much more availability for companies to take kids on, and actually train them up. And I am encouraging my kids to do that. Possibly more than actually to go down the university route” (C2 man, 50s)
- “my kids have both gone into plumbing...they have friends that are slightly older than them, they saw that they were in it, they realized there was money to be made” (C2 man, 60s)
- “the principles are a great way of a great way of getting out of education and going into work. If you're not academic.....if it's a brilliant, brilliant scheme, but I've been using it [with my son] as not a weapon, but I've been saying to him, if you don't get the grades, then that's going to have to be an option. And I know he's a bit worried because of his peers because there's no one else around him that's going down that avenue. So he feels like a failure if he takes on an apprenticeship. And I think there's a lot of stigma that comes with it. And I probably do add a little bit to it because I do literally use it as ‘this is the other option if things don't go to plan’. But to be fair, I haven't really looked into apprenticeships that much. And my eldest son has told me that it probably would probably be the best option for [my middle son] because there's so many different things out there for him. And he's a practical person. He's very creative. He's worked with his hands, and he's very good with that side of things. It's just academic study and the exams which he's not designed for, so I think apprenticeships are great, but I wish they would [present them] as a really positive option. Because he looks at it as the last straw he has. And it's not great.” (C2 woman, 40s)

- [when discussing the younger apprenticeship prioritising] *“there's apprenticeships for people at any age? I thought apprenticeships were just for kind of younger people. I mean, it's difficult, isn't it? Because it would be nice to think that anybody at any age should have the flexibility to be able to change careers, if they're willing to actually make the effort to do it. But I guess if I'm really honest, that that should be for kids, really, so they can get that that decent start”* (B man, 30s)
- *“we all have to be trained and retrained, I'm in the middle of it now. But I think we need to really like focus on the younger generation, they need our help more than more ever. In the last 30,40,50 years things have dramatically changed. And it's so much harder for younger generation. So they need to be prioritized. Otherwise, they are looking at a bleak future”* (C2 woman, 40s)
- [on making companies report more on apprenticeship spend and young people, and extra efforts to stop young people dropping out] *“I don't think you should trust any big company to do a good job and do the right thing. If I'm honest. I think you can guarantee they'll do the exact opposite and do what's good for them. But So absolutely, you should restrict the bigger companies and help out the small companies.”* (B man, 30s) [chorus of nods and agreement around the table at this point]

They were highly sceptical of contextual admissions into university, but initially struggled with the concept (despite also being sceptical of exams as a marker of valid assessment)

- *“How would you do that? You say, Oh, this area a B counts for an A, this area a D counts for an A? I like the idea of making it fair, but how you actually do it is mind boggling. I wouldn't know where to begin on an individual basis, wouldn't you? And [if universities] had to go through everybody's coursework for the whole year and see how they've done for everything? no one's no one's going to do that.”* (B man, 30s)
- *“I don't know about this...I honestly I don't know. And I don't know how it would work. It would just be too hard”* (C2 woman, 40s)
- The group also struggled with the concept of a social mobility score card for universities or publishing data on which students went to which universities – and didn't especially feel either that it would shame universities or incentivise them to do anything differently.

The concept of a social mobility scorecard or addressing workplace recruitment, explained several different ways, didn't resonate. Overall, they were sceptical about any sense of incentivising or assessing taking a wider intake for 'top jobs'

- Most of the group started by explaining that they just wanted their children to be “happy”, to “enjoy it”, or to “fit in” with jobs
- When explicitly pushed on ‘top jobs’, most of the group struggled to define it – eventually offering up doctor, solicitor, and child psychologist

- Using their framing of doctors and solicitors and testing whether everyone has an even chance of getting into those careers and whether more could be done to equalise opportunity, the group were sceptical. *“Does it still mean you're getting the sense of the best people for the job? That's the tricky part. Because I do agree that it should be you that should give everyone the same chance. But if you're not picking one person that's best, maybe someone else, I don't know. Again, it baffles my brain to try and think of how you would make that fair, If my daughter wanted to be a doctor. I'd probably have had to start thinking about it three years ago. So yeah, I think that probably makes a difference [when children with better grades], I feel like they're sort of pushed towards that from a very, very young age. And the education obviously reflects that”* (B man, 30s)
- *“they can pick who they like. If they have to release the data about who they've been picking, then they have to stand by that don't they?”* (C2 woman, 40s)
- *“the middle class to rich education is a whole different level. They're all in private school, you know. And if that was to be published, the thing is, what would be done about it?”* (C2 woman, 40s)

Specific findings – York

As with Hastings, the group was not opposed to equalising opportunity in principle, but struggled to reconcile it in practice. Interestingly, parents were split on which of the two manifesto demands that they thought would work– maths coaching for parents or auto-enrollment – they preferred. And they were split along gender lines with mums preferring the childcare option and dads the maths coaching.

Participants had a very mixed experience of using childcare from fairly extensive to almost nothing. And while it was almost all was ad hoc, it was broadly considered to be of a good standard. The advantages were very much considered to be rooted in socialisation. And if it was more than a day or two, it was considered very expensive, and the system was considered very complicated. Auto enrollment was popular.

- *“It's all about kids being socialized: making friends for them and for us at the school gates.”* C1, man, 50s
- *“I just couldn't afford to take the promotion I was offered, it would have ended up costing me money to take the promotion.”* C2, woman, 30s
- *“My wife went back to work because she needed to talk to normal people, but she came out of it only 15 quid up per day. Before that she it made no sense to go back financially”* C1, man, 30s
- *“The voucher scheme is very very tricky. It's an arduous task”* C2, man, 30s
- *“I didn't have a clue – my friend had to guide me through it all. I found out way too late that I was entitled to more free hours than I was”* – C2, woman, 30s

- *"I think there's so much out there, so many different things, so much to navigate. It puts pressure on nurseries that they have to explain it." C1 woman, 40s*
- *Auto enrollment made a lot of sense to the group. "It's so complicated, it sounds better to me to do it through the council like that" C1, man, 30s. "They're aware of the children – you get your child allowance automatically, so it would be easy to do." C1 woman, 40s. "If people aren't aware, they'll be much worse off. There are so many things that you're entitled to. So if people knew exactly where they stand they'll be much better off – C1, man, 30s*


Participants were hugely animated by the complexity of helping with maths homework. It was considered uniquely challenging among the subjects. The idea of teaching parents to help their kids came up unprompted and was very popular as a way of solving the learning gap. But the idea of needing to do such training in-person and the time commitment meant people had reservations; if it were online or on-demand then tutorials were very welcome.

- *"They don't learn the way we did at school. I think I'm slightly more intelligent than a 10 year old but I couldn't help my daughter with it. It's all backward – C1, man, 30s*
- *"The other week my daughter brought a maths book to me and I looked at it and I didn't have a clue, I may as well have been reading Swahili. I had to get her older sister to help her." C2, woman, 30s*
- *"It's taught different to anything I was taught." C1 woman, 40s*
- *"I'm lucky that my son is quite intelligent and so I get him to help my daughter because he's three years ahead of her and had been taught in the same way." C2, man, 30s*
- *"They should teach parents" C1 woman, 40s*
- *"Our school is very active and has evening sessions on how to teach kids maths. Things like long division. It does help, but it's not easy. Forgetting how we learnt and learning a new way to do something is hard." C2, man, 30s*
- *"The nature of the modern world is that we're all so busy. It's a great idea. But I have three kids and they all need bed, bath, stories. Things like gymnastics too. But in theory it's a good idea – C1 woman, 40s*
- *"I'm busy and time is under pressure. If there were a few online examples you could watch, then it would really help – C1, man, 50s*
- *"Layla will show me something she's struggling with and I won't have a clue. I have to have a quick look on YouTube." C1, man, 30s*
- *"There's only really maths where they're teaching things in a completely different way. Reading is reading and science is science – but not maths." C1, man, 30s*
- *"I can get through teaching my kids English, geography, science – and if not I can find out how to do something – but with maths you have to understand the method." C2, man, 30s*



School attendance was seen as really important - but education was not the main reason. Socialisation, routine, making friends and structure were more important. And yet despite that, overwhelmingly, this group thought there should be more flexibility in terms of attendance - especially regarding informal and educational trips with family and for family holidays. Regimes of fines for non-attendance are loathed. And similarly, there were no buyers for the idea that councils or schools should communicate more on attendance with parents.

- *"It's so important that they socialize and they make friends" C1, man, 50s*
- *All participants knew lots of children who are not going to school as much as they used to. "There is so much, so much. There's all the mental illness" C2, woman, 30s "Among my daughters' friends there is at least two who almost never show up. They have real problems" C1, man, 50s*
- *The group felt that parents - mostly other parents - were not as fussed about attendance. They also thought that given all the other breaks to education recently, that occasional absences were understandable. "We've had covid and strikes and all this other time off - but it bewilders me that there are fines if you don't show up" C2, man, 30s. "When Covid was about my asthmatic daughter couldn't even give a cough without sending her home - but now they tell me I should be sending her when she's really poorly." C2, woman, 30s. "It's what we see. Closed schools due to Covid. Teachers on strike. There's been an erosion in the pinnacle of importance of being at school" C1, man, 50s. "There are the parents who are working from home so they don't feel the pressure to have to send them to school, so they just send them back to their room" C2, man, 30s*
- *Fines for non attendance were not popular and the group confessed to themselves using term time holidays. "I had to lie to my school about going on a nice holiday to Italy. I do believe the routine of school is important but it has to be a bit more lenient - they had all this time off for Covid and now the strikes - what difference is a day or two going to make?" C1, man, 30s*
- *Texts were not seen to be effective. "Parents would just read the text and say "ah well, never mind. A text won't make a difference." C2, woman, 30s. "This is for older kids, you know, when parents don't know they're skiving and should be told. At primary if they're not ill and not in school then the parents won't care. If the parents do care, but they're off, then they're off for a reason, so it won't make any difference." C1, man, 30s. "If they parents aren't on board then they're not going to suddenly change their mind because of a call" C1, man, 50s*



Participants were reasonably content with the situation on admissions. Geographical location of schools was very important. Parents knew that there wasn't equality of access to the best schools but were relatively resigned / content on this and exceptionally cynical about whether reform would work.

- *"The reason I'm sending my kid to the school is the same one her sister goes to. It's hit and miss to be honest with some of the kids, but the reason we picked it was that it's convenient and its safe to travel to because it's the nearest one."* C2, woman, 30s
- *"Where we live, we've got a primary 200 yards in one direction and the secondary is 200 yards away so they're going from one to the other. And that's fine. It's Huntingdon School but don't tell them I took my kids on holiday"* C1, man, 30s
- *"They go where their mates are going because it's the most important thing is that they're happy."* C1, man, 50s
- *"Where we live there is an option of three schools. It important that the kids themselves decide what looks good – that's as important as what we think as parents. It's them who has to go. They're at a sensitive age"* C2 woman 30s.
- Participants were clear that there was not equality of access to the best schools but relatively resigned to this. *"Affluent housing is in the best catchments and that comes down to the job you do. This just naturally happens"* C2, man, 30s. *"If the parents are financially stable, and they want them to go to a school, then they just move to the area. But in my case the best school is far away and I can't drive."* C2, woman, 30s. *"How do you think people with money do it? They move house to the catchment area. Nothing in life is fair though. It's just how it is"* C1, man, 50s. *"Life's not fair. I can't afford to move to an area with schools. But that's just life"* C1 woman, 40s
- And they were exceptionally cynical about whether reform the system would work. *"Someone will always miss out"* C1 woman, 40s. *"Even if we got into the best school, it's a long way away and there's no bus route, so we'd have to drive them, but that would cost us money and work"* C2, man, 30s. *"It's about safety too. You want them near. You want to know where they are"* C2, man, 30s. *"In an ideal world it would be great. But if I decided I wanted to send my kids to great school on the other side of York, I couldn't get them there. And they wouldn't want to go because their friends aren't there."* C1, man, 30s. *"For me, I'd like to have fairer access to good schools but I'm the parent of young girls and the school is very close by and they travel as a horde. It's about safety"* C2, woman, 30s. *"Everyone would want to send their kids to the best school if they were allowed to and none to the most rubbish ones"* C2, woman, 30s