

The National Employment Service - Communications and Political Strategy

How to present NES truthfully and durably across the political spectrum. Companion to the White Paper. Discussion draft.

The first principle: honesty is the strategy

The National Employment Service (NES) is unusual among policy proposals in that its communications strategy is to **tell the truth, including the inconvenient parts**. It is not self-funding; it is a real, ongoing cost to the Exchequer; and whether that cost is worth paying is a value judgement for the public, not a technical fact to be asserted. Saying so plainly is not a weakness to manage - it is the source of the proposal's credibility, and the thing that lets it survive scrutiny from every side.

This means the strategy below never reaches for the easy overclaim. We do not say "it pays for itself." We do not bury the cost. We do not present a value choice as a technical necessity. A proposal that has to hide its price does not deserve to win the argument; one that states its price and its evidenced value, and trusts the public to judge, can.

Positioning

NES is practical public infrastructure - the connective layer that joins up a fragmented system and pays for valuable work the market will not fund. It is **non-partisan by construction**: every component, including the funding, is built to survive a fiscal-conservative, a social-democratic and a libertarian reading. It is offered as a worked-through option for the country to consider, not a programme to be sold.

Core message

NES helps people into good work and skills, and pays for valuable work the market won't - a real, additional offer, at an honest price the public gets to weigh.

Two missions, said plainly: (1) better routes into work and retraining; (2) paid, additional community contribution for people and places the market has left behind. Voluntary, at a real wage, never workfare.

Language to use

- Joined-up support; one route in
- Paid, additional, voluntary work
- A real wage, real employment
- Help into work where work exists; a dignified floor where it doesn't
- Honest about the cost; the public decides if it's worth it
- Prove it in a pilot before building it nationally
- Uses what already exists; adds only what's missing

- Non-partisan; presents options, doesn't advocate

Language to avoid

- "Self-funding" or "pays for itself" - it does not, and claiming so destroys credibility
- "Free", "no cost", or any framing that hides the price
- "Corps", "brigade", "national service", "jobs army" - wrong connotations
- "Mandatory", "conditionality", "getting people off benefits" - it is voluntary and not workfare
- "Patriotic revival", "national greatness" - partisan register
- "Skills Passport" or "national database" - it is a consent-based, federated data view, not a central store
- Treating the soft benefits (wellbeing, social value) as banked facts rather than graded, uncertain estimates

Audience messaging

| Audience | The honest message |
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| The public | One joined-up service that helps you into work, or pays you for valuable work where there are no jobs. Voluntary, a real wage, real support. It costs money; here's the price and the evidence, and the choice is yours. |
| HM Treasury | Not self-funding - a real net cost (~£4bn/yr at full scale), with much of the return landing in other departments and over a longer horizon. The ask is a cross-departmental settlement and a pilot that proves the benefit-cost ratio before any national commitment. |
| Fiscal conservatives | Redirects passive benefits into productive activity; tackles welfare dependency at its root via make-work-pay; strict additionality; pilot-first, so no £4bn bet on an unproven assumption. |
| Social democrats | Dignity-first, Real Living Wage, paid contribution, regional justice; explicitly not workfare. The funding menu lets you fund more ambition if the country chooses it. |
| Libertarians | Voluntary, no compulsion; no national database (consent-based and federated); confined to work the market does not do; no tax is prescribed. |
| Local government and mayors | Delivered through you, not over your head; funds local priorities and community capacity; surfaces unmet need and presses for it to be properly resourced. |
| Business | A better-prepared candidate pipeline; additionality rules and a Real Living Wage cap mean it does not undercut or compete with private employers. |
| Unions and the voluntary sector | Paid, additional capacity that complements volunteers and cannot replace existing paid jobs; union sign-off on every role. |
| Devolved nations | England-led delivery; the make-work-pay element is UK-wide and reserved; the model is yours to adopt as employment and skills are devolved. |

Answering the real attacks - with the design, not deflection

| The attack | The honest answer |
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| "Isn't this workfare?" | No. Placements are voluntary, paid at the Real Living Wage, with full employment rights and no sanctions. The evidence is clear that voluntary support outperforms mandatory - which is why the design is built that way, not just framed that way. |
| "Can the country afford ~£4bn a year?" | It is a real, ongoing cost - we don't pretend otherwise. The right question is whether the per-person social value is worth the per-person cost, and that is a judgement for the public. The pilot is there to prove the value before any national commitment, so the big bill is only ever spent on something shown to work. |
| "Isn't it just another expensive quango?" | NES owns only the integration-and-paid-contribution layer that genuinely exists nowhere; it uses Skills England, the Mayors, the colleges and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) rather than duplicating them. The national spine is deliberately lean - it commissions and sets standards, it doesn't deliver directly. |
| "Won't it create dead-end make-work?" | The evidence (Germany's ABM job-creation schemes, from the German Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen) shows sheltered, dead-end work harms the employable - so the design does the opposite: progression and real employers by default for anyone who can reach the market, with permanent placement reserved for those who genuinely can't. |
| "Is this a surveillance database?" | No. There is no national database. Data stays in its existing systems and is surfaced only with the person's consent. It is opt-in and broker-only. |
| "Won't it just displace real jobs?" | Additionality is engineered, not asserted: a funded-post test, union sign-off, dedicated non-market entities, and - crucially - displacement measured directly in the pilot rather than assumed. |
| "Is this a left-wing project?" | No tax is prescribed; the funding is a neutral core plus an optional menu the public chooses from. It is designed to be fundable by a government of any stripe, and to be rejected by any if the public judges it not worth the cost. |

Non-negotiables for anyone communicating NES

- **Never claim it is self-funding.** State the price and the evidenced value.
- **Present options; do not advocate adoption.** The value question belongs to the public and their representatives.
- **Keep it non-partisan.** It must pass half the electorate and their MPs, or it cannot move through government.
- **Don't overclaim the soft benefits.** Wellbeing and social value are real but uncertain; say so, with their evidence grades.
- **Lead with the pilot.** The ask is to prove it, not to build it nationally on faith.

Companion to the *White Paper*, the *Public Summary*, the *costing* and the *Evidence Annex*.