Bridget Phillipson
Labour MP for Houghton and Sunderland South
Shadow Secretary of State for Education
House of Commons
SW1A 0AA

Via email

25 October 2023

Dear Bridget Phillipson,

Re. Labour's plans to improve maths education and RSS support

We are writing on behalf of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) – an organisation that advocates for the key role of statistics and data in society, on behalf of its membership. One of our main areas of concern is education and statistical literacy – we want society to be more statistically literate, so that people's understanding of data, risk and probability can inform their daily decision-making. We would welcome the opportunity to explore how we and our members might be of assistance to you and your team in the development of further Labour education policy on maths, statistics, and data.

We listened to your recent [speech on education at the Labour Conference](#) with interest, especially to the aspects relating to maths education. We were pleased to hear discussion of its real-world relevance and the importance of improving maths education from an early age.

We welcome Labour's recognition that maths matters to success in daily life – from finances to cooking to sports. We were pleased to see that [Labour plans to boost lifelong numeracy by improving the teaching of 'real-world' maths](#). We believe that statistical and data literacy are of particular importance to equip young people with the skills they need to interrogate and interpret the world around them. We think that teaching these skills using relevant examples, applicable to day-to-day scenarios, is crucial to allow students to understand how important these subjects are to daily life, enjoy studying them, and pick up the skills they need.

We also welcome Labour's plans to focus on improving maths education from an early age. As we recently set out in [our response to Rishi Sunak's 'Maths to 18' proposals](#), we think it is imperative to focus on maths, statistics, and data education pre-16. By the time students reach age 16 to 18 it is too late – they are already influenced by previous, possibly negative, experiences of maths. We believe that to change the negative attitudes towards maths, statistics, and data science in the UK, a broad approach, beginning from an early age, must be taken.

In our [response to the Prime Minister's 'Maths to 18' proposals](#), we set out a range of recommendations to improve maths, statistics, and data education. These include considering the skills we value and want young people to be equipped with before considering what the curriculum should cover and how assessment can capture these skills. We would also like to see maths, statistics, and data education that harnesses the power of technology and involves education of digital skills – to reflect how these subjects are used in the real world.

We recognise that vast improvements in teacher supply, skills, and wellbeing are needed, along with the need to ensure teachers are brought along with new curriculum plans: it is crucial that teachers are invested and passionate in order to be able to inspire students. We also believe that teachers should be provided with easy-to-use resources (eg ready-made interactive data-sets) to aid with teaching the data and statistical literacy skills that young people need.

We are especially concerned with improving the situation for the 'forgotten third' (pupils who obtained below a grade 4 in English and Maths GCSE at age 16). Currently this group are required to resit Maths GCSE until

they pass – with low chances of doing so, which reduce further each time they have to resit. A better solution is needed for this group – we suggest working to identify the skills that are essential for navigating life (from our perspective this includes statistical and data literacy) and teaching and assessing them in a different way.

Our ambition is for all students to leave school with the skills they need to successfully navigate life, and to enjoy learning these subjects and see their relevance as tools to understand the world around them. The RSS would welcome any opportunity to discuss Labour's education policy with yourself or a member of your team further. We would be pleased to explore how we and our members might be of assistance in the development of future Labour education policy plans.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Sarah Cumbers
Chief Executive

Dr Sophie Carr
Vice President for Education
And Statistical Literacy