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Fiddled Funding Figures Fear

Mid Worcestershire MP Peter Luff believes the government is fiddling new figures for schools funding that "miraculously improve the county's position in an attempt to diffuse one of the most difficult issues it faces in Worcestershire." He has written to schools minister and county MP Jacqui Smith challenging her to explain what is going on.

His action follows extensive correspondence with local campaigner Helen Donovan, who explained to him,

"If you look on the DfES website <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/inyourarea/> and type Worcestershire into the authority box and then choose funding from the menu which appears on the screen, you will see it says we have had a £680 increase per pupil in real terms since 1997 (which equates to 25% and is 8% below the English average).

"Look at the footnote, at the bottom of the screen. The DfES claim amongst other things that every child in every authority has had at least a £1000 increase since 1997, which is plainly contradicted by their own website, on the same page!

"Now look at the new figures in a Parliamentary answer to Mike Foster (on link PQ 11829). The real terms increase has suddenly shot up to £920 (33%), worked out by taking the 1998/9 figures, away from the 2005/6 figures

"How did we manage that, an increase of 8% in one go, just by the addition of the 2005-06 figs and the GDP deflator (a measure of national inflation common to all authorities) being applied?"

With his suspicions aroused, Peter asked Helen to undertake further analysis and then wrote to Jacqui Smith saying,

"As you know, I continue to work closely with my constituent Helen Donovan on the issue of funding for Worcestershire schools. We are both mystified by what is happening to the figures – figures that, until now, I had believed we could rely upon. Frankly, I suspect some creative manipulation designed to put a more favourable gloss on the situation in your and my county, but I am happy to be proved wrong.

"Helen and I have five specific questions.

"1. Are the funding figures quoted in a Parliamentary answer to Mike Foster (PQ11829) the same real terms funding figures as quoted on <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/inyourarea/> with the addition of 2005/06 and the application of the new GDP deflator? (June 2005).

"2. If they are, can you explain how Worcestershire's real terms increase, (previously 1997-2004/5), has increased from £680 (25%) according to the DfES data base, to £920 (33%), just from the addition of the 2005/06 figs, excluding the 1997/98 figs which are not quoted, and with the new GDP deflator, which is the same across all LEAs.

"3. Why does the data now run from 1998/9 and not 1997/8? It is usual for your government to quote figures from when it came to office and not from an arbitrary later year. Could it be that the exclusion of this first year enables you to paint a more favourable, but misleading picture?

"4. For Warwickshire, Gloucestershire, Birmingham and Worcestershire the current official DfES real terms figures give increases since 1997 of £910, £800, £1170 and £680 respectively. The 'new' figures in the Parliamentary answer show real terms increases of £1040 (+£130 on original), £970 (+£170 on original), £1380 (+£210 on original) and £920 (+£240 on original) respectively.

“How can it be correct, that the county currently showing the lowest increase since 1997, out of all the shires (us at £680), now shows an increase of £240 on the original amount, larger than all our neighbours, including Birmingham, purely from the addition of 2005/06 figs and the use of the new GDP deflator?”

“5. However, the real terms funding gap on the 'new' figures, between Birmingham and Worcestershire has risen from the current figure of £750 to £840 per pupil. Why?”

“The manipulation of these statistics gives me real cause for concern. Is there an innocent explanation that has escaped me, or have errors been made?”