



Rural Services All Party Parliamentary Inquiry: Oral Evidence Session on Education

Held at Westminster on 23 February 2010

Lindsey Wharmby, f40 Financial Consultant and Francis Loftus, f40 Executive Committee Member (North Yorks) attended on behalf the f40 Group.

1. Stephen Kingdom, Deputy Director, School Resources Group, (DCSF)

Explained the need for a basic entitlement with top-ups for AEN and SEN. Deprivation should not be the exclusive reason for additional funding. Any top-up should recognise different costs: wage costs and sparsity. The DCSF will not fund small schools for the sake of it.

Two questions had faced the review of the formula: should the basic entitlement be needs based and should there be an activity led formula?

With AEN the decision is which proxy indicator to use. FSM has advantages if data is used at pupil level. The disadvantage is that it is binary with different levels of take up. Tax credits will pick up those out of work but what about those on low incomes? There are other indicators eg Mosaic.

There is then the issue of high costs SEN.

Sparsity: what are the additional costs? How should it be defined especially super-sparsity?

DCSF now has pupil data not national census data. He indicated that the consultation would commence 'soon'.

[The issue of home to school transport came up and it was explained that this is not part of the schools block of funding].

2. Rita Hale

Successive governments have concentrated on deprivation not rurality. New data streams enable the government to identify the differences between LAs and their actual costs. Rurality explains 40% of the differences in costs of schools. The only way to be sure of actual costs is to 'drill down' into LA databases.

Government thinking supposes that there are lower employment costs in schools. Rural derivation is hidden. The government should concentrate on the effect of rurality on the cost of provision.

3. Jeremy Coninx, Director of Funding and Market Management, Training & Development Agency

Not sure why he was there, could not answer any of the questions about the place of trainees in schools or provision of in service training. It is likely that there are fewer student teachers in rural schools because the pattern of teaching practices is often for a series of short placements or for only a few days a week. Students realistically have to be able to travel from their base near the teacher training institution – and these are in urban areas. However Jeremy Coninx did not have the data to prove or disprove this!

4. Susan Fielden, Finance Group Manager, Children and Young People, Somerset County Council & Association of Directors of Children's services representative

Explained how their activity-led formula linked to policy.

Noted that changing patterns of provision is difficult.

FSM eligibility is not the same as take up.

Small schools can distort the funding of the whole budget.

Staffing costs can be disproportionately high because teachers stay in Somerset.

Very high need SEN costs can blow a hole in a LA budget.

5. Devon Hands Up campaign for fairer school funding; Chair, Devon Association of Secondary Headteachers and Principal of Holsworthy College.

Gave a very clear statement of how his school is disadvantaged by the Devon AWPU which is some £300 per pupil lower than average. Noted cost pressures in the curriculum and the reluctance to cut anything, and the pressure to deliver a full set of options and wide curriculum to enable pupils to have opportunities.

6. Mick Brookes, General secretary, NAHT

Raised the obvious point that changes to the funding system are easier to implement when budget shares are rising, but that this was not a reason to hold back on implementing a fairer system. He also spoke up about the quality of education provided by small rural schools but pointed out the increasing difficulties faced by Heads with burgeoning bureaucracy.

7. Mervyn Benford, Secretary, National Association of Small Schools

Made an impassioned plea that small schools should be the norm. (Probably not realistic in the current climate).

8. Lindsey Wharmby and Francis Loftus (f40)

We should not use the present patterns of allocation as evidence of cost – a low-funded authority can only distribute the money it has – real need may be higher!

Data is better than ever before: it must be used at pupil level to determine budgets.

Basic entitlement needs to be very clear – it is the basic level of educational provision that this country can afford.

AEN and SEN need to be identified and funded clearly.

Very high cost SEN could be funded through government office regional funding.

Pre-school and Early Years provision is dis-proportionately expensive in sparse areas: any small group within an already small school become a 'super sparsity' issue.

The evidence is there from the DCSF – students from deprived backgrounds in small pockets do not do as well as the similar students in areas of high deprivation (and better funding).

We have rightly tackled the educational disadvantage in our urban communities but rural communities also have disadvantages, though there are fewer voices calling attention to them!

Funding discrepancies throughout the country is not limited to rural authorities. Natural justice dictates that fair funding should mean that in a world of 'Every Child Matters' and in a restricted or diminishing pot, just because a decision is hard, does not mean it should be ducked. The start of an administration is a good time to take the difficult decisions.

9. Follow up action required

The Inquiry panel has requested anecdotal evidence with examples of work that is not done or seriously curtailed because of the discrepancy in funding.

Evidence should be submitted to: Philip Dunne MP (Chair) dunnep@parliament.uk