



Notes of meeting with Stephen Twigg MP, Shadow Education Secretary

Tuesday, 11 December 2012

Present: Stephen Twigg MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Education; Adam McNicholas, Parliamentary Assistant.

Ivan Ould (Chair of f40); Gillian Hayward (Vice Chair of f40); Doug Allan (Secretary to f40); Bernadette Hunter and Margaret Judd (f40 Executive Committee members)

After introductions DA indicated the range of documents sent electronically to Mr Twigg's office, including Fair Funding Timeline, Briefing Paper, What is Fair Funding paper and current GUF figures for all LAs. There was a general discussion about the f40 campaign and what has/has not been achieved. In recent years it was agreed that the funding position for the poorest funded LAs has got considerably worse, with the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' widening still further.

The gap between neighbouring LAs is a cause for alarm; the difference between neighbouring LAs in some parts of the country is over £1k. This situation is worsened as many poorer LAs provide education for pupils from better off LAs, but the better funding does not travel with the pupil!

When ST said he was interested to know what f40 wanted from the proposed new national funding formula, GH responded by pointing out that a new funding arrangement is currently being forced upon schools and LAs...and it is creating considerable and damaging g turbulence. This is ironic bearing in mind the fact that the Secretary of State postponed the introduction of the new national funding formula until post-2015 in order to avoid turbulence. GH suggested that there is a difference between 'simple' and 'simplistic', but that the government doesn't appear to understand it.

MJ suggested that the recently introduced Lump Sum, which is common for schools at all levels, is bizarre and is causing massive problems. She said that at least a different lump sum for primary and secondary would be helpful.

BH said that the Schools Minister must be having a very busy time as just about every LA is urgently wanting to meet him to discuss their concerns. MFG is a real issue creating considerable angst and uncertainty – what will happen after two years? How can schools plan for the future?

ST asked if f40 had identified a pattern in how schools will lose out and BH explained that there will certainly be winners and losers. There is no consistency in the Lump Sum that LAs have chosen to apply. LACSEG is challenging LAs – it's a threat to a wide range of services. Academies have choices about which LA services they use. LAs are losing funding regardless of whether academies on their patch use their support services. If LA services are lost, then schools will have to go to private sources, at greater cost, putting even more pressure on budgets, and creating a new source of profit for the private sector. LA services are, of course, at cost, without a profit element.

GH raised the fact that there is reducing capital available for maintenance, special projects and new build.

IO pointed out that standards in Leicestershire schools were either very good or excellent, despite low funding...and this situation is common among f40 LAs. But maintaining these standards is unsustainable in an increasingly difficult financial climate.

The many impacts on school and LA funding are extremely worrying and will have serious consequences, particularly for the vulnerable. He suggested that under 'Every Child Matters' there was some consistency of approach – but all of that is in danger nowadays. Parents, he suggested, are being disenfranchised. In the past the LA was there to deal with issues, but who will parents turn to if LAs are excluded from arrangements? How do they complain about an academy? There will be no proper accountability.

BH suggested that the government is following a dangerous and wrong path, which potentially will change education provision for the worse. If there is a change of government in 2015, Labour will inherit a mess and must be ready with its own plans to put matters right. She asked ST what he is aiming to do if his party get into power. ST said he could see the difficulties created by the Coalition and he was pessimistic for the near future. He wondered if f40 would want national or local funding delivery arrangement...and GH said an element of both was desirable as long as some local discretion was allowed. She added that the DfE talk about a 'hard' or 'soft' option – the first being to exclude LAs altogether and the latter to maintain some oversight. It would be a real shame if the professionalism, expertise, accountability and experience of LAs were to be lost to education. Importantly, once the arrangement is destroyed it will be virtually impossible to regain it. And the fact is that most schools are actually more than happy with their LA and the services they provide.

IO repeated his concerns about the role of the EFA, describing the organisation as an unnecessary bureaucratic and expensive layer of administration. BH wondered how the EFA could possibly deal with 23,000 schools? How could they manage a budget process without understanding the local nuances? She concluded that it would be impossible.

ST said that his party is currently examining a whole range of issues relating to education provision, but is yet to determine its stance, but is interested in the issues that f40 is raising. IO suggested ST may wish to include the cost of school transport in the review as provision is real nightmare for LAs. It is a demand-led service provided by LAs. If they are not to survive as providers in the future, who will manage the service?

GH and IO asked about the austerity programme and asked what labour's view is on the fact that this government is able to find substantial new money for pet projects (pupil premium and Under-7s), but claims that there is nothing to make core funding fairer. ST acknowledged the point. IO questioned what pupil premium had really achieved, other than providing extra funding to those who were already well-funded?

ST asked what key factors f40 would go for in setting budgets. IO suggested basic entitlement and add ons. MJ suggested that core funding must take account of the core provision of a school, then the pupil element.

BH indicated that her school in Burton on Trent is part of an eight-school Trust – a model which is proving increasingly popular and attractive. ST said he was very interested in Trust and other models which are being developed. BH suggested it would be good to see Labour pushing the concept. He

added that it is his opinion that everything possible must be done to avoid fragmentation of the current system. He suggested that the opportunity would be taken to examine new and proposed funding arrangements – and other initiatives such as academies and free schools.

IO reminded ST that in the last government, Labour held LAs to account over the issue of spare school places, yet this government is allowing spare capacity to grow.

On the issue of school balances, IO explained the very real and creditable reasons why it is important and necessary for most schools to maintain a balance, most notably for future planning and new project development.

BH reminded everyone that any new school must be an academy or a free school...and ST referred to this as being 'bonkers'. ST suggested that extra places might be allowed following the Autumn Statement.

In closing the meeting ST said he hoped that this was the beginning of a strong and regular dialogue and all agreed it will be.

IO mentioned the Uplift proposal that f40 had submitted to the SoS in April, but had been rejected. ST said £99m sounded like a modest amount and he was surprised the government couldn't see the value in agreeing to such a request. It would have shown good intent. DA to email a copy of f40's Uplift proposals (letter and calculations) to ST.

DA to add ST's office to f40's database to receive regular information on f40's activities/news alerts.

A further meeting will be arranged after LA budgets are in place around April 2013.