



Notes of meeting with f40 Vice Chair Layla Moran MP (Lib Dem) held on Thursday, January 21, 2021

Attendance:

- Layla Moran, Liberal Democrat MP and Vice Chair of f40
- Owen Sainsbury, Parliamentary Assistant to Layla Moran MP
- Cllr James McInnes, f40 Chair / Cabinet Member for Children and Schools, Devon CC
- Emily Proffitt, Headteacher / Deputy Chair of f40
- Margaret Judd, Funding Manager, Dorset Council
- Andrew Minall, Head of Education Financial Services, Hampshire CC
- Karen Westcott, Secretary of f40

1. Welcome

JMcl thanked LM for her time and for supporting the f40 group.

LM said she was happy to be Vice Chair and was glad to meet with members to discuss issues around education funding. She apologised that she was not always able to attend f40 Executive Committee meetings due to diary commitments but said she would always try to join.

2. f40 campaign objectives

Fairness

JMcl said while the National Funding Formula had made improvements to the distribution of education funding, it was a long way from where it needed to be. He said some schools received far more per pupil than others, even before additional funding for deprivation and area living costs had been added.

EP said in her experience as a headteacher, fairness did not exist across the country, particularly across rural “shire” areas. She said it was difficult for any headteacher to budget right now, but it was especially difficult for the lowest funded schools. She said there was also deprivation in rural areas, which was often overlooked.

MJ said there had been a number of changes to the way education was funded over the years, and those changes had not always gelled together well. She said f40 understood that in London teachers were paid more than elsewhere because of higher living costs and there were more disadvantaged children, so schools in the City should receive more funding. However, she said it needed to be done in a fair way. At the moment she said some schools received more basic funding purely because that was the way it had always been, and the historic disparities had never been dealt with.

MJ said Government was attempting to level up the funding but was reluctant to reduce the funding of schools that received the most, so had decided, instead, to increase the budgets of the lowest funded. However, she said it was a very slow process and would take many, many years before all schools received the same level of basic funding.

LM said when government was consulting on the National Funding Formula, the DfE had to take into consideration the historic funding situation. She said it was too expensive to bring all schools up to the highest level of funding, and it would have been unfair to take funding away from schools that received the most. It was felt a gradual levelling up was the best option.

LM said Covid, and the impact on budgets, had shone a light on this issue once again. She asked if f40 could provide figures that showed a comparison between how well f40 schools had coped with the financial burden of the pandemic in relation to schools in non-member local authority areas.

She asked if f40 could demonstrate cases where schools in f40 areas had been forced to resort to emergency budgets due to Covid or had been unable to make their books balance.

She said if f40 was able to provide the evidence it would reinforce the point that schools in f40 areas were not managing as well as others during the pandemic.

MJ said she was not sure whether Covid had had that impact yet but said there were schools in Dorset that had been in that position before. She said as many schools were academies now, it was difficult to see their figures other than what was published in their public accounts.

AM said in Hampshire they had seen some schools that had struggled in recent years and had been forced to reduce their staffing to make their budgets stretch. He said in some cases, particularly small schools, they only had enough teachers to match the number of classes. In these circumstances, the headteacher may have stepped in when a teacher was absent. He said budgets had been so tight there was no meat left on the bone for some, so when Covid hit and teachers had to isolate or became ill for longer periods, it left classes without a teacher and schools unable to operate.

AM said loss of income, from things like after school clubs and the hiring out of facilities, had been a huge issue to low funded schools as many relied upon their extra incomes to meet their basic costs.

JMcl said in Devon some schools had reduced their outgoings as far as they could and were unable to make any further cuts – they simply could not reduce their staffing anymore. However, he said often schools became accustomed to managing with very little, even if it meant losing staff to balance the books. He said if they were accustomed to being frugal, they were used to living in a frugal world. In comparison, some schools may live in a much nicer world, with bigger budgets.

EP said, as a headteacher, you learn to manage your budget but that did not mean that you were able to provide the schooling and support that children needed. She said sometimes schools could not afford to provide what was needed.

Covid

EP said loss of income during Covid had had a significant impact on her school, while the pandemic had also led to greater costs. She estimated that at her primary school of 220 pupils, she was spending around £200 a week on cleaning materials. On top of that there was PPE and extra teaching resources needed. She said these were costs that were not budgeted for but were necessary and schools had to provide them.

Early Years

LM said she had spoken with several headteachers and many had voiced concerns around their nursery funding. She said the current policies around funding support for nurseries during the pandemic were not working. She said what applied to schools, did not apply to school nurseries. For many schools, she said nurseries generated income, so it was hitting their budgets hard.

MJ said the pandemic's impact on nurseries had hit the whole sector and not just those linked to schools. She said they had seen little budget increases in recent years, but had faced big increases in expenditure, particularly with the rise to the minimum wage. However, she agreed that schools often paid nursery staff more than the private sector, so a lack of nursery income now, due to Covid, could be hitting schools hard. MJ said many nurseries across the sector were struggling.

She said she feared for the future of nurseries, which provided a vital service to the development of children and young people.

EP said there had been confusion around the imminent census of nursery schools, when pupils would be counted to determine budgets for next year. She said there was concern that if pupils were not in because of the pandemic, as parents had chosen not to send them or because places had been restricted due to health and safety, they would not be provided for in the following year's budget.

She said she had been told to include children in the census if they were expected to attend next year, regardless of whether or not they were in class that day. And she said the same applied when trying to calculate how many children would qualify for free school meals.

However, EP said the guidance was contradictory. She said if the school had restricted nursery attendance because of health and safety during Covid, pupils could not be counted in the census. However, if parents had decided not to send their children to school, they could be included.

JMcl said the latest guidance on nursery funding made no sense. He said it seemed the DfE had not taken all of the issues into account.

LM asked why the DfE had not just asked nursery providers to predict what the pupil numbers would be next year. She said she believed both nursery support and how children were counted in the census needed to be sorted out immediately.

EP said school nursery provision made very little profit anyway and the lack of funding support meant that some providers would have to consider redundancies.

Deprivation

JMcl said a lot of people living in rural areas did not have broadband or laptops and other devices, which made homeschooling children very difficult. He said government had circulated a million laptops, but more were needed and the system for distributing them should be improved.

LM said a headteacher in her constituency had just received their allocation of two laptops, although she had requested more. She said on receiving the two computers, the head then had to work out who needed them the most and who to give them to. LM said schools and parents had worked around a lack of laptops for so long. She said many had managed to find other devices, or had learned to operate without them, and it was almost too late for government to provide laptops.

LM said the government answer to a lack of broadband had been to provide dongles to schools for distribution to parents, and she was eager to find out if they were working. She said some schools had reported problems.

EP said at her school they had submitted their request for dongles to the DfE but had not received them yet.

JMcl said government had badged a lack of broadband and devices as being issues for disadvantaged areas of towns and cities, but it did not include rural areas.

EP said as far as she was aware, as a headteacher, the DfE had decided whether or not a child was disadvantaged due to whether or not they had a social worker. She said only one child at her school had a social worker so was considered disadvantaged by the DfE, but she believed there were between 18 and 20 pupils who should have qualified. In her view, they should all have received laptops from government, but her school had only received one.

LM said a review of children's social care had been launched this month in order to improve the outcome for young people in care. She questioned why government was using Social Services' figures to determine how many children were disadvantaged when they were clearly overstretched.

EP said a child with a social worker was not necessarily disadvantaged, and similarly disadvantaged children may not have a social worker.

SEND

JMcl said he wanted to discuss SEND because if the pandemic had not happened, SEND would be the main crisis in education. He said f40 wanted to see the government review into SEND completed and the recommendations implemented as soon as possible.

JMcl described SEND as a perfect storm and said the current system was expensive.

LM said it was very difficult to push something that was not Covid-related at present. She said she was looking at how Covid had impacted on special needs. She said special schools had been open as usual throughout the pandemic and had faced lots of additional costs in PPE and other resources. She believed special school staff should be among the first to be vaccinated as social distancing with SEND pupils was almost impossible.

JMcl agreed but said it must be remembered that 70% of SEND pupils attended mainstream schools.

MJ said the issue was the number of children coming into the SEND system with EHCPs versus the available budget. She said there was not enough money in the system to pay for their support and needs.

She said under the current system local authorities were having to place SEND pupils into independent specialist schools because they did not have the capacity themselves, and sometimes parents opted for a special school over mainstream school. She said independent specialist provision was expensive and local authorities did not have the budgets to cover the cost.

AM said current government regulation stated that all newly created special schools had to be academies, which hampered local authorities from providing additional specialist provision. He said the rules should be altered to give local authorities more scope to expand their number of specialist school places.

LM said if a local authority was able to provide specialist school places it should not be prevented from doing so.

LM said when f40 holds an MPs' briefing later this year, it should not just focus on Covid-related issues but include a section to discuss areas of concern pre-Covid, too. f40 members agreed.

JMcl thanked LM for her time.

LM said she hoped to be able to attend future Executive Committee meetings and was keen to continue in her role as Vice Chair of f40.