

Text of letters to local MPs sent by Nicole Meardon, Cabinet Member for Children and Families

As you may be aware, the second stage of the consultation into changes to school funding was announced last month. Whilst the proposals are still at the consultation stage, I wanted to update you on the potential implications for schools and education in Cheshire West and Chester (CWAC). Whilst there should be some recognition that the DfE have actually delivered a proposed National Funding Formula (NFF), which has been talked about for many years and thought too great a challenge for any government to deliver, the proposed new NFF, if unchanged, would result in a poor outcome for CWAC schools when compared to existing allocations.

Up until 2015/16 CWAC was historically underfunded when compared to other LAs. In 2015/2016 we got a £9.4m uplift as part of £390m allocated to bring poorer funded LAs closer to national average funding. The new proposed formula now takes funding away from schools which are already struggling to contain costs within their existing funding allocations. Of concern is the extent of the reductions in both the Lump Sum Allocations and the basic per pupil amount, which combined remove almost £7.9m from school budgets. These two funding elements are there to provide sufficient funding for all schools to be sustainable before other specific factors, that target resources based on need, are factored in. It is clear from our analysis that many of our schools may not be sustainable due the scale of the funding that is being removed through changes to these factors. It is imperative that the minimum funding required to operate a school of all sizes is established and funded.

An increase in the national funding allocated through Deprivation and for Low Prior Attainment should be welcomed. For Deprivation, this Borough's overall funding position is broadly neutral in cash terms. However, with overall increased funding going into this factor, CWAC is considered to be a loser, despite significant areas of deprivation. Also, the overall increases in both Deprivation and Low Prior Attainment are clearly at the expense of the basic funding required to sustain a school. Increased allocations for Deprivation and for LPA should be additional and not just a consequence of reallocation.

Cheshire West and Chester is a Borough with a mix of urban centres interspersed with rural villages. As a consequence we have a large proportion of small, rural schools and there was a broad expectation, not least through the responses to the first stage of the consultation, that there would be sufficient funding for these schools to ensure their survival. The reduction in the Lump Sum and AWPU rates, which impact on all schools, will fall disproportionately on these small schools. The DfE has suggested that the Sparsity factor (to be made compulsory) solves this issue but this LA already uses this factor and it can only apply to 5 schools in the Borough as it currently operates; this does little to redress the funding challenge for the rural schools. A key aspect of this funding factor is the proximity of a school to other schools, which is based on direct line between them. This is inconsistent with other national policies (e.g. that which determines whether a child is eligible for Home to School Transport) which are based on the journey distance on public roads/footpaths. It would be much more appropriate and equitable for sparsity funding to be based on the latter, which might go some way to provide additional funding to protect our small and locally remote schools.

Claims that education funding has been increasing in real terms are misleading. The DfE did provide £390m of new funding in 2015/16 as a stop gap to bring the poorer funded LAs closer to the national average levels of funding, but the majority of the increases in the level of funding are in response to increased demand due to rising numbers of pupils in schools and increasing numbers requiring SEN support. Other increases have been required to support new initiatives such as extending the 3 and 4 year old childcare off to 30hrs per week as well as the new offer for 2 year olds.

CWAC recognises that we benefitted from the funding uplift in 2015-16 when the LA received an additional £9.4m from the national growth of £390m. This funding, which is now allocated to schools through our formula, has no doubt gone to help our schools meet the ever increasing cost pressures on them and bring provision up to the standards enjoyed elsewhere in the country. Now, having recognised that there was a need for significant additional funding for this Borough, we seem to be in the position of facing school funding reductions of £4.247m by 2019-20, which would increase to almost £6.4m in future years as Minimum Funding Guarantee protection for individual schools unravel. We are now faced with schools having to make significant reductions over the coming years to stay within budgets.

The NFF merely redistributes the existing national funding with no recognition of the cost pressures faced by schools across the country and within CWAC. By the time the new formula is fully operational there will have been several years when school funding will have been cash flat. Schools have already had to fund the impact of changes in NI contributions, the National Living Wage, increases in pension costs, in addition to general inflation. Looking ahead further budget pressures include the new Apprenticeship Levy, the funding of services that local authorities will not be able to continue to provide without charging schools due to the reductions being made to the Education Services Grant.

Currently over 90% of our schools are good or outstanding and we are committed to making that true of every school. Not one school is inadequate. This is testament to the great work of our schools, the Local Authority and the effective local partnerships between all schools in their own localities.

Cheshire West and Chester Council is committed to supporting all schools, regardless of status, and will continue to work in local partnerships to improve the outcomes for all children. Of particular importance is our pledge to close the gap in educational attainment between our disadvantaged children and those that are not.

However, to achieve our goal that all children attend a good or outstanding school we need our schools to be well-funded through a fair and transparent funding formula which does not disadvantage any child on any basis.

I am concerned that the proposals set forward in the NFF consultation seek to undermine the ability of our schools to continue to improve outcomes for children. Our schools are facing real-term cuts to their funding, with increased costs and inflation making it difficult for some schools to manage budgets. It is clear that to fairly fund our schools and make sure we achieve the very best for our children, we require not just redistribution of funds, but a levelling up of resources to areas such as Cheshire West.

The withdrawal of the Education Service Grant (ESG) will remove our capacity to provide a range of key services such as educational welfare. It is untenable to expect Local Government to retain the statutory duty to provide these services, without having the means to do so. Given the depth of cuts to local government budgets overall, there is little capacity to absorb the removal of the Education Support Grant and it will put these services at risk. If these functions are passed on to schools it will only increase the budgetary pressures facing schools.

As a Council we will continue to work with all schools, teachers, governors, parents, system leaders, Regional Schools Commissioner and local communities to ensure education in Cheshire West and Chester maintains and improves high educational standards and reflects the principles of inclusivity, collaboration and local accountability.

We will also continue to support all schools with high quality services and working alongside maintained schools, standalone academies and MATs. We believe in strong school-to-school support and the autonomy of schools, which are at the heart of our school improvement strategy.

It is fundamental, therefore, that our schools are funded adequately and fairly and that Local Authorities are properly funded to provide statutory services.

I have written to the Secretary of State to explain our concerns and ask that the NFF is revised to ensure a truly fair-funding system which does not disadvantage any child. This will require modifying the proposed NFF to ensure Lump Sum and APWU are risen to ensure schools can operate on a sustainable budget. I have also asked that the Secretary of state to retain the Education Services Grant for local authorities to enable vital services to continue.

I would be grateful if you would be able to raise these issues with the Secretary of State and Department for Education within parliament or directly.

I would be more than happy to meet you if you require further information and to tell you about the good work we are doing with schools in Cheshire West.

Cheshire West Children Are Not Worth Less

Last month the Government announced the second stage of the consultation on fair funding in education. This refers to a redistribution of the funds spent on all schools across England. Under the current funding regime schools in Cheshire West and Chester receive about £400 less per pupil, per year, than the national average figure.

The Government were asked to address discrepancies such as this but have instead proposed a system which will see even less funding going to Cheshire West schools.

The Government proposals will see our schools have their funding cut by £4.247million by 2019-20, increasing to almost £6.4million in future years.

Some secondary schools are set to lose up to £179,000 and our some primary schools could lose up to £55,000.

This will result in schools losing valuable staff, both teachers and support staff who are all essential to the day-to-day running of our schools and achieving the good outcomes our children and young people deserve.

If you visit the website www.schoolcuts.org.uk you can see what the cuts mean for your local schools.

Our schools are already facing real-term cuts to their funding, with increased costs and inflation making it difficult for some schools to manage budgets.

The new proposed national funding formula is not fair. The children and young people of Cheshire West are not worth less than those in other parts of the country.

Our schools need to be adequately resourced so that we can continue to provide good quality education and our children can get the best start in life.

I would encourage everyone who cares about education to contact their local MP and express their concerns about school funding and to make sure every child gets the best education possible. You can find the contact details of your local MP at www.writetothem.com.

Cllr Nicole Meardon

Cabinet Member for Children and Families