

I am writing around the funding challenges faced by your school and others in the constituency of Bexhill and Battle which I have represented since 2015. I wanted to share my thoughts with you on this matter and, most importantly, obtain your own views and ideas.

Upon my election, I set out to visit every school in the constituency by the end of my five-year term. Thanks to the warm welcome I have received, I have visited almost 40 schools across my 250 square miles of constituency. Meeting with you, your staff and our local school pupils is without doubt the most rewarding part of my job. I have been fortunate enough to have made many return visits to many schools for specific projects. It has also been a pleasure to welcome schools to Parliament for tours.

Whenever I visit, I take the opportunity to discuss the challenges which head-teachers are facing. It has long been clear to me that funding is increasingly an issue. The Government I represent is correct in highlighting that the schools budget, at over £40 billion, is ring-fenced and has never been higher. However, the increased expenditure which schools are required to meet to fund, amongst other items, the increase in salaries and the living wage, national insurance and pensions contributions and the apprenticeship levy, means that more schools are unable to balance budgets without impactful changes being made.

I had hoped, given I represent a constituency where 75% of the geography is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, that the revised funding formula would benefit schools in the constituency. Overall, the revised formula will increase school funding by 1.5% across the constituency as a whole. I welcome this increase. Sixteen schools in the constituency will receive increases in funding. However, twenty-three schools in the constituency will see their budgets reduce as a result of the new formula (the remaining two schools are neutral).

On researching the figures per school, it became clear to me that the most rural of our schools appear to be those which are impacted negatively. I was therefore the first MP in to go over to the Department of Education to lobby the Schools Minister and his team of officials and understand how the formula has been calculated.

It appears to me that the formula is based on a combination of the pupil premium, a general assessment of the council tax banding within the catchment area and dispensation if the nearest school is further afield. This appears to be an exercise based, in part at least, on general assumptions which are not specific to the needs of the pupil. Having lived locally for ten years, it is clear to me that we have rural deprivation. The needs of the pupils are not specifically demonstrative of the council tax levy from all properties in the locality.

As a follow-up to the meeting with the Schools Minister, I have written to him this week to express my concerns around school funding in general and the manner in which the formula treats some of the schools within the constituency. For the second time, I have highlighted the issue of our schools paying the apprenticeship levy. I have also flagged up issues around SEND, OFSTED and assessments. My latest letter attaches correspondence which I received by one of our local head-teachers who has written a powerful account of the challenges which her schools are facing.

As a Conservative MP, I recognise that I stood on a mandate which pledged to balance the books. I note that the Government has relaxed this financial discipline in order to invest in infrastructure projects which boost productivity. I will be arguing that education must be the biggest driver for productivity and certain schools need assistance in order to invest in our future. I am working closely with the Lead Member for Education at ESCC, Cllr Nick Bennett, who has separately written to the Schools Minister in order to highlight the challenges for schools across our county.

I would be grateful if you, or your Governors, could drop me a line with your views on the current challenges. I will be looking to take these directly to Government Ministers in order to campaign for a better deal for our schools.

The partnership I have struck up with many of you ensures that I will do my utmost to stand up for your school. I recognise the frustration which many of you may be feeling and I hope that you will be willing to work with me so that I can do my best to defend the interests of your school.

Do feel free to share this letter with your staff and governors.