

Fair funding pledge on schools - Western Morning News Monday, January 11th

SCHOOLS in the Westcountry could receive more education funding under plans by Children's Secretary Ed Balls to tackle "anomalies" which see the region's schools short-changed by hundreds of pounds per pupil. A Government review into the formula which decides how much money is allocated per pupil could radically change how much schools in the Westcountry receive, Mr Balls said.

Almost every part of the region is among the 50 areas which receive the least funding. This year, Devon is the fourth worst funded area in the country, allocated just £3,842 per pupil, 9 per cent less than the English average of £4,217. By contrast, the 10 best-funded areas receive an average of £6,252. Of the 151 local education authorities, Cornwall is the 11th worst funded, Somerset 14th, Dorset 23rd, Plymouth 44th and Torbay 53rd. Each receives hundreds of pounds less than the England average which can mean a shortfall of up to £150,000 in a school with 400 pupils.

Mr Balls told the Western Morning News that Labour's drive for "stability" in the funding system had been good for councils and head teachers to plan ahead. But he admitted: "The problem with stability is over time it tends to become less fair." The F40 group of the least well-funded councils has warned: "The gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' is widening and there is no agreement about the basic entitlement for each pupil."

The review of the Direct Schools Grant was first announced in 2008, and Mr Balls will shortly set out the "principles of the review" which will be followed by "a big consultation". "We can't do this overnight," he said. Wakefield council, in his own constituency, is among the F40 councils at the bottom of the league table, ranked just below Plymouth.

"I very much understand these concerns," said Mr Balls. He said Labour's decision to link funding to "deprivation" had been "really important but so is rurality and sparsity". Last week it emerged rural pupils were getting a "raw deal", as a school with 350 pupils in the countryside receives on average £300,000 less than those in urban areas.

Mr Balls said: "We want the formula to be fair but we also know that big shifts, just like that, are hugely destabilising and hard to plan for. We also know that look there are lots of schools which are doing pretty well in areas with low funding. When I arrived following the difficulties at the beginning of the last decade, there was a real emphasis on stability in funding. We started the review into the direct schools grant because I think the problem with stability over time tends to become less fair. So we are looking really hard at trying to find a way in which need and numbers and diversity and sparsity – these are all properly being reflected."

One purpose of the review is "to make sure some of these anomalies get ironed out", he said. Mr Balls was critical of Liberal Democrat and Conservative plans for a so-called "pupil premium", which would see additional money "follow" the most disadvantaged children. "You have to be really careful ... where you have pupil funding then a premium for disadvantage," he said. "The way in which you do that could turn out to be fairer or less fair to F40 members. It depends how you would set the formula up and importantly if there is more money. If you are a school in your area which is told we are changing some of the formula but you are going to get less money per pupil, I think they would probably think 'hang on a sec, is that really a better outcome for us'."