



Notes of meeting with DfE held on Tuesday, November 3, 2020

DfE:

- Tom Goldman, Deputy Director, Funding Policy Unit, Department for Education
- Kwamina Korsah, Policy Advisor, Department for Education

f40:

- Cllr James McInnes, f40 chair / Cabinet Member for Children and Schools, Devon CC
- Margaret Judd, Funding Manager, Dorset Council
- Andrew Minall, Head of Education Financial Services, Hampshire CC
- Karen Westcott, Secretary of f40

1. Introductions

TG explained that Tony Foot had now returned from sabbatical and had been appointed the Department for Education's Director of Finance. He said unfortunately TF had been unable to join the meeting that day.

2. Discussion

JMcl thanked the DfE team for the opportunity to meet to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on school and education budgets.

He said budgets were already tight for schools, and the ongoing pandemic had exacerbated the issue for many.

TG said the meetings with the f40 group were useful. He said the government remained strongly interested in additional Covid costs for schools, and the more information DfE had, the better.

He said the DfE needed evidence and examples, which could most usefully come through representative organisations, such as f40.

JMcl said schools had done a tremendous job – opening to all pupils from September and working within the new parameters of the pandemic.

He said, as he understood it, schools were able to claim back additional costs brought about by the pandemic from earlier in the summer term, but that they were so far unable to claim back any more recent expenses.

KK explained that he was managing school budgets and policy around Covid funding. He said schools would be able to take advantage of a second 'mop up' round of claiming back expenses that were still outstanding from the summer term.

3. Extra costs

JMcl said most children were back in class from September, but schools were incurring a lot of extra costs, particularly with regards supply teaching, as so many teachers were having to isolate due to Covid.

JMcl said demand had already outstripped the supply teacher budgets of many schools, and f40 believed the issue needed to be recognised and addressed.

- Subsequent to the meeting, the DfE announced additional financial support relating to staff absence costs between the beginning of November and the end of December 2020.

JMcl said many schools would also be facing additional winter bills this year. He said as Covid required schools to keep windows and doors open, to aid ventilation, many would be utilising the heating more to compensate.

MJ said there were many additional costs, such as:

- Buying extra resources – as children could no longer share due to social distancing
- Winter costs
- Additional water usage caused by extra cleaning and washing of hands

MJ said she believed a long-term view needed to be taken on the impact of Covid, as while some schools may have made savings initially – from cancelled trips, heating, closing part of their buildings – many will have incurred greater costs over the autumn term.

She said cash flow may be a problem for some schools, so ensuring a sustainable plan was in place would be vital.

AM said one size did not fit all and he understood why the Treasury would push back on some aspects of the Covid costs.

However, he said it was important to recognise that while some schools could be flexible in the way they operated their budgets and staffing levels, others had very little wriggle room. For some, Covid was having a real impact on their ability to continue.

AM said, for example, a small school with four teachers that relied on the headteacher to step in when a teacher was off ill, would struggle if any of its teachers had to isolate for two weeks. Whereas a large school with many teachers may be able to operate more smoothly when members of staff had to isolate.

AM said he believed, due to size, small schools were less able to cope with staff absences than larger schools during Covid because recent funding changes had typically directed greater gains to the bigger schools.

AM said schools were also having to buy extra resources, and were having to pay more for water, heating, and sometimes additional things, such as sewerage services.

For example, he said there were cases of schools having to empty cesspits twice as often as usual because of the extra cleaning and hand washing.

4. Special Schools

TG asked what the situation was in special schools, and said it was vital they were considered in all of the discussions.

JMcl said special schools were spending more on PPE, which should be recognised by the DfE. f40 provided information to TG and KK about how much had been spent on PPE by an academy trust during the first six months of the pandemic – more than £43,000 over five schools.

It was explained that some pupils at special schools were prone to licking and biting staff, so wearing full PPE was paramount for teachers and support staff.

5. DfE requesting more information

TG said the DfE would like more information about the additional cost of PPE for special schools, along with other additional costs for SEND schools during the pandemic.

He also said the DfE would like more information about the number of staff that were absent from schools due to Covid, and schools' ability to cope with gaps in staffing.

He agreed that one size did not fit all. He said the DfE would want to ensure that any system supported schools, whilst also allowing them to respond to their individual circumstances.

He said the more understanding the DfE had about the degree of variability between schools, the better it would be able to do that. He said they were keen to know what proportion of schools – even with the best will in the world – f40 felt could not cope with the added pressures of Covid and teacher absence.

JMcl said it appeared that secondary schools were coping better than primaries. He said when a member of a primary class contracted Covid, the whole class went off for two weeks, including the teacher and teaching assistant. In a small school, the impact was great.

KK said it appeared that economies of scale were at play – the bigger the school, the better they were able to cope.

KK said the DfE was interested to know how close schools were coming to closing and not being able to continue their activities. He said the department was trying to get the best possible sense of how widespread the problem was.

JMcl said in Devon, they had had 235 teachers isolating (at that time). He said there were a lot of very small primary schools in Devon, which were struggling with the Covid situation. However, he said they hadn't, at that point, reached a position where they had to close.

TG said he appreciated that some schools didn't have a lot of fat in the system, so were unable to deal easily with teacher absences.

He said it could be that schools in deprived areas had a greater number of Covid cases but were relatively more highly funded, so were better able to deal with teacher absences due to isolating.

Conversely, he said in less deprived areas, while the cases of Covid may be fewer, schools may be less able to deal with teacher absences when they arose, purely because they had fewer resources.

MJ said even schools with a greater number of staff may have to resort to support staff teaching children when qualified teachers went absent, so children were still losing out – even if the schools appeared to be coping better.

MJ also reminded the DfE that not all supply costs were measured against a specific supply budget. She said a headteacher or other senior leader may undertake supply, for example, but that would be at the expense of the time they had to undertake their headship/school duties.

MJ said some schools employed supply via zero-hour contracts of known staff (retired staff for example), but the costs may appear in the general staffing budget, not in the supply budget.

TG agreed and asked if f40 could help in providing more information.

6. Covid testing in schools

JMcl asked if teachers and pupils could be given higher priority when it came to Covid testing. He said entire cities were now being tested, and so questioned whether whole schools could be tested in the same way – with results returned immediately.

TG said he would pass that suggestion on. He agreed that the faster the testing, and more widespread it was, the better, although there was, of course, a much wider context in deciding how to prioritise the availability of testing.

7. Cash flow

TG asked if many schools were struggling with their cash flow. He said, as it stood, he believed there were only a few schools with serious cash flow issues and there were mechanisms in place to deal with them. He said he would be interested to know if that situation was changing.

Members of f40 agreed.

8. Loss of income

MJ said loss of income was also a big issue for many schools and Early Years providers.

MJ said she appreciated that schools could not be recompensed for everything they had lost but said f40 believed they should be compensated for part of their lost income – as was the case for local authorities.

TG asked how much of a problem loss of income was to schools.

AM said some breakfast and after-school clubs had closed, while others had started running again, but were scaled back. He said schools were often still incurring full costs from these clubs, while not receiving the same income.

He said many schools were dealing with redundancies, and their associated costs, linked to clubs and activities, such as these.

MJ said school clubs and Early Years were not being used as much as they were. She said parents were often not using them because they wanted to restrict contact and the chances of their children contracting the illness. She also said many parents were working from home, so the need for after-school clubs and nurseries had declined.

JMcl said a lot of activities, such as cubs and scouts, had not resumed since the first lockdown.

9. Balancing savings with extra costs

TG said he appreciated that schools had faced additional costs.

However, he said schools may have also made some degree of off-setting savings during the first lockdown period. TG said the DfE would welcome more information about both savings and additional costs.

MJ said the maintained schools in Dorset had been asked to provide the local authority with a predicted return on budgets for 2020/21. She said the council wanted to be able to compare year on year expenditure. However, she said that information was only just being collected now.

AM said there would be savings, whether it be from catering, school trips, or heating and water usage, though, of course, outweighed by the additional costs incurred.

JMcl said it was important to remember that most schools remained open throughout the lockdown, so while there may have been savings, schools were not closed, but were supporting vulnerable children and the children of keyworkers. They will have continued to have operating costs, he said.

TG asked if f40 could help to identify the scale of savings that may have been made by schools during the first half of 2020.

10. Additional issues

JMcl said when schools returned in September, everyone thought there would be increased instances of vulnerable children having come to harm during the first lockdown period. However, he said evidence had so far not shown this to be the case.

JMcl said the fact that children were in small bubbles, and less able to have confidential conversations with teachers, may mean that some children feel unable to voice their concerns or fears. He said issues may come to light at a later date.

JMcl asked that the DfE consider this issue in their long-term planning around Covid support.

And he also asked if a long-term plan could be adopted with regards school transport and extra funding.

TG said he understood both points and said they would be taken into consideration.

11. Elective Home Education

MJ raised the issue of Elective Home Education (EHE) and said more children were being taken out of schools due to the pandemic. She said, as a result, these children will not have been included in the October school census, and therefore not included in funding projections for next year. MJ said this posed a problem for schools if they were then brought back into the system next year, as there would be insufficient funding to cater for them.

MJ suggested the DfE use UPN / ULN data through the census to understand whether this was happening and adjust funding to individual schools accordingly.

Both AM and JMcl said they had seen a spike in the number of children being taken out of school for EHE.

TG said the department would keep a close eye on EHE to monitor the trends and would take action accordingly. He said they had also been looking at the number of children enrolled into Reception at primary schools, but Covid had not appeared to have had an impact on the numbers.

12. SEND

JMcl said he appreciated the discussion was about Covid costs for schools but felt he could not ignore the issue of SEND. He asked if the DfE was looking at SEND funding.

TG said, without doubt, SEND costs was a very significant issue in school funding. He assured f40 that the department was looking at the issue of SEND and said colleagues were working hard on progressing the SEND review.

13. In summary

The f40 group has agreed to assist in providing more information to the DfE on:

- PPE and other costs to SEND schools
- Impact of teacher absences on schools' ability to cope with Covid
- Supply teacher costs to schools
- Savings to schools

Ends