

Our ref: 19 07 16 SoS Funding VA

Appendix 4

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The Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith St
Westminster
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Councillor John Holdich OBE
Leaders Office
Town Hall
Bridge Street
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Dear Mr Hinds,

I am writing to outline to you our very serious concerns around schools funding and the impact it is having in Peterborough.

I am conscious we will not be the first local authority in the country to raise this matter with you, as the financial pressures faced by schools nationally are well documented.

However, the challenges experienced by our schools in our city are unique, not least the number of children who speak English as an additional language and the high levels of movement of children between schools each year, which means that the impact of reduced funding is felt much greater.

In addition to these challenges, Peterborough has experienced significant growth in its pupils numbers. Since 2010, the number of pupils in city schools has increased by 26%, more than double the national average, and there are now more than 135 languages spoken.

We have been working hard with our schools and academy trusts to tackle the educational challenges that we face in order to improve standards, but this is becoming increasingly difficult in the context of reducing real terms schools funding.

Whilst I appreciate that the overall education budget has increased, the impact of inflation, pay awards and increasing demands on schools from austerity cuts in other services, including those provided by the local authority, equates to a real terms cut in funding of 10% since 2010.

Officers at the council recently wrote to every headteacher in the city to assess the level of impact that funding cuts have had on schools. The feedback was unanimous in its view that

the lack of funding places significant risk of impacting children's education and as a result their future prospects.

There were many examples of the financial pressures shared by schools including using apprentices to cover roles, reducing the number of teaching assistants, headteachers in large schools teaching classes when there are not enough teachers to cover, increased class sizes in some areas and reducing spending on learning equipment. Some schools are having to remove subjects from their curriculum, such as drama, and one school reported cutting weekly counselling/play therapy sessions offered by the YMCA to children in need of support.

Schools have also raised significant concerns about the requirement for them to fund the first £6,000 of a child's Education, Health and Care Plan, which means funding has to be cut from other areas including the budget for teaching staff. Headteachers have to deal with significant ethical challenges to decide how best to spend their funding. Peterborough has a higher than average rate of Education Health and Care Plans (against statistical neighbours) and I am proud to say that Peterborough is an inclusive city. However our support for the most vulnerable is under pressure in the current context.

We have worked hard as a local authority to keep pace with rising pupil numbers and this has taken significant investment through borrowing and effective strategic planning.

Peterborough has engaged effectively with the Free School programme and we will have four free schools open in September, 5% of our total schools. The Department recently announced Peterborough would be the only authority in the country to receive approval for the consideration of a new school under the new voluntary-aided schools capital scheme.

This has created some challenges locally and given the profile of this new approach and the decision making process I will have to undertake, I would welcome the chance to discuss this with you. I would also like to share with you the feedback we have received from schools of the impact the current level of funding is having on Peterborough pupils as I feel it is important you understand this context.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Lynne Ayres
Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education, Skills and the University