

My contribution to the Backbench Debate on a Motion relating to School Funding, 25 April 2019

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I represent parts of West Berkshire Council area and parts of Wokingham Borough Council area.

Both councils face exactly the same problems with schools. In both cases, we receive very low amounts per pupil compared with the national average. That means we cannot provide as varied and as richly resourced a curriculum as schools that are better endowed.

But the biggest problem we face today, which I hope the Minister and his colleagues will address urgently, is on High Needs. High Needs should be the area that we are keenest to help on. The pupils that require that special support need to be properly supported financially from the centre as well as well supported by the local professionals.

In the case of West Berkshire, I am advised there will be 9% more pupils needing that support this year and their budget only gone up by 0.5%. So, I ask the Minister, how does he think we manage to pay for all those extra pupils who need that extra support when the budget is so mealy set?

And in Wokingham, too, there is quite rapid growth in numbers requiring support and very little growth in the money being made available. Wokingham has the additional problem that because we are an extremely fast-growing part of the country, taking a very large number of new houses, we are way behind in putting in the necessary educational provision for special needs so that Wokingham now has to find facilities for a 119 special needs pupils outside the Borough because nobody has bothered to make the money available so that we can catch-up. It would be better, and probably better value as well, if more of that provision could be made locally close to where the children and their parents live and this is not an option given the delay.

I have raised with the Minister before the issue about general school's funding which has been made more difficult by the rapid growth in pupil numbers. I am pleased to say that we now do have a new secondary school and three new primary schools that have gone in relatively recently to catch-up with the backlog in the provision of places for this very fast-growing part of the country. But that creates its own financial problems which the Minister and his system does not recognise.

The first problem we have is there is delay in getting the money in for the new schools as the provision goes in so the budgets of the other schools are squeezed. The next thing that happens is that when we have last got, for example, our new secondary school it makes a lot of places available all in one go because it establishes itself with a certain capacity and then pupils are attracted to that school, perfectly reasonably, and are taken away from

other schools and those other schools then face an immediate cut in the amount of money they have because suddenly they don't have the right number of pupils to sustain the budget. It will would take time to slim down their offer and sometimes it will be very painful and difficult to do. Again, the system is simply too inflexible to recognise this is a basic requirement of the system.

And, if it means we have a few more places to give parents more choice I think that is good, but I'm a realist, you have to pay for it Minister and we expect the Minister to do so representing a Government which says it believes in parental choice and believes in high standards for pupils going to state schools, something which the Minister and I entirely agree about.

If I ever am tempted in to give a talk or to visit an independent school if I go to the really well-endowed ones I just see a different world in terms of the library resources, the range of curriculum on offer, the sporting facilities and the support they get because money does buy you something better. I want the pupils that go to state schools in West Berkshire and Wokingham to have access to the best and we simply cannot do that on the current budget.

So, Minister, this Government should stop trying to £39 billion to the European Union to delay our exit for two to four years when the public voted to get out. Let's go hold of the money Minister. Let's put it where it matters, let's put it into social care, let's put it into schools, let's have some tax cuts for hard pressed families so they can provide more for their own children. That is what the public want. Get on with it Minister.