

Speech: Anne Milton addresses Association of Colleges spring conference

I was appointed to this job on 12th June 2017 – so almost but not quite 2 years ago. For a minister these days it's quite a long time – although the longest serving skills minister was Baroness Blackstone who was Minister for both FE and HE for 4 years (1997-2001).

To be honest before that I knew very little about FE, nothing about what an apprenticeship involved, what all the different qualifications were – it was only O Levels, CSEs and A Levels in my day – or what really went on in Colleges.

That lack of awareness of what FE does won't be restricted to me. Many people, including some MPs, are unaware of the huge amount of activity that goes on in college campuses around the country, and do not understand the full range of learning opportunities that are available. 2 years – a brief period compared to how long many of you in this room have been involved in the FE sector. But in that time, it has been an enormous privilege to learn so much about the reach and impact of FE. A sector that changes people's lives. A sector that never gives up on anyone. And a sector with multiple strands of business, that has never had the attention it deserved and does – so much – for so many.

As a new Minister my private office arranges meetings with all the different policy teams. You get lobbied by all the interest groups and you go out on visits – and bit by bit the landscape starts to make sense. The muddle of all the different policy areas slowly come into focus. The different acronyms and abbreviations, the impact of a policy change in one area on another and your priorities start to emerge. You begin to realise what is at the heart of all you are trying to achieve.

And for me in further education it must be Colleges – you are the central pillar of the landscape. Independent learning providers have their place, but Colleges are the foundations on which further education stands.

The other issue of particular note to me when I started, was that FE and the colleges that deliver it – were often swamped in the media by the maybe not-unjustifiable focus on schools – and separately drowned out by the often misguided belief that university is the only way of realising people's life chances and strengthening our economy.

So, whilst getting on with policy development, raising the profile of FE around government has been an absolute priority. With the help of many MPs and the fantastic work from AoC and the 6th Form Association we have done just that.

We are crafting a skills and professional and technical education landscape – which is intent on redressing the balance in our education system. We are changing the direction towards a much greater emphasis on skills, on technical education so that what YOU do moves to the centre of the stage – standing shoulder to shoulder with schools and HEIs. All of you have an equal role to play.

I have grown to understand the issues you face in trying to carry out the very difficult job you do. I have grown to understand better your educational mission and your social mission. Colleges are at the beating heart of our communities.

I have visited a wide range of different colleges and providers – big and small, general and specialist.

At the multi-sited Central Bedfordshire College – struck by their enthusiasm, the important work on Prevent – and their Strategic College Improvement Fund project aimed at delivering better outcomes for their learners.

At Nelson and Colne College – hugely impressed by their community learning – delivering Family Learning with KS2 to help parents develop their children and their work in the area of SEND.

City College Norwich also focussed on High Needs students with an adaptive model coping with over 400 SEND learners.

At Barton Peveril Sixth Form College – as someone who was a somewhat reluctant learner – I actually felt inspired to be back in full time education by the enthusiasm and motivation of the principal and staff!

At Eastleigh College – I was impressed by their join up with local NHS trust and their flexible approach to use of the college – open all hours allowing workers to travel from afar to use the facilities.

I visited the specialist land-based Ashkam Bryan College and held new born lambs. I stood in front of the train at the High Speed Rail College and saw the fantastic equipment at Kirklees and Harlow, some of it on loan from local business. And of course, the common feature of all those visits are the students and apprentices themselves, who's lives you are changing.

If I have not named your college or been able to visit yet, I do frequently hear about the good work you do, how you do it and the difficulties you face. I have listened to your concerns and issues such as base rate funding, delivery of English and maths, young people's mental health issues and challenges of delivering industry placements.

We make the policy in the Department, but it's you that has to deliver – it's you that has to work with employers and develop the right provision – you that has to manage your budgets and ultimately – you that has to train and educate people of all ages, backgrounds and levels ...right from basic skills courses to Level 7 professional education.

No other education sector can boast that breadth of provision and I am proud

to say I am the Minister of the sector that does all that.

In making the policies that you deliver, the teams in the DfE work with you and other interested parties, and also with those outside DfE considering research, analysis and of course work with Treasury.

We also work across government for example in the areas of ESOL having shared working with Home office and working with DWP on pre-employment provision.

Some of your members may also be aware that we have an FE Immersion programme. Where policy leads are able to spend time – typically 3 days – with a college or FE provider to understand how they operate, the day to day running, issues, meet with students and see how policies are being delivered in practice. Staff have found the programme invaluable – particularly those officials who specifically work in areas that have an impact in FE. I would like to thank the many colleges that are taking part in the programme.

The Marmot Review (2010) – Fair Society, Healthy Lives, set out the reasons for socioeconomic inequalities in health and what could be done to reduce them. It identified that inequalities in educational outcomes affect physical and mental health, as well as income, employment and quality of life. The Marmot Review recommended that to reduce inequalities across the social classes needed a sustained commitment to children and young people through the years of education.

As an example – those living in the wealthier areas of Stockton-on-Tees can expect to live as much as 18 years longer than those in the more deprived parts of the same town. Even in my own seat of Guildford, men living in the Burpham area can expect to live up to 86 years. For those only 20 minutes' drive away in the Shalford area meanwhile, the number is less than 80. And it is no coincidence that in those areas of the country with higher life expectancy, we see higher rates of university entry among 18-year olds. Wherever you look in the country, you will often find a demonstrable correlation between education and life expectancy.

So, the education people receive, the role post 16 education plays, and the impact on health and in wider society cannot be underestimated.

FE supports social mobility and social integration.

It helps to support racial and gender equality. And ultimately supports better health.

It gives everyone – irrespective of background, class, attainment, religion, race – the opportunity to get the education and skills they need to get on in life – and in an inclusive, welcoming and supportive setting.

The FE Sector is a driver of social mobility and is at the heart of all we do- creating an education system that works for everybody. It forms our national infrastructure for skills – having a key role in delivering our key national priorities to improve productivity, fill the skills gaps, and equips people with the skills they need to get on. At one end colleges will be delivering on higher level professional and Technical skills, and the

colleges sector will be key to delivery of T levels. I am delighted that we are working hand in hand with providers to deliver T Levels – and I think the momentum that is building across that programme is testament to what we can achieve when Government works in true partnership with colleges.

At the other end it's about delivering ESOL, basic skills, English and maths – helping those who are most vulnerable and furthest away from the labour market to acquire the skills they need to progress.

Of course, whilst colleges' most important role is as learning organisations they have a key role as community organisations too.

They can be the institution that provides safety and stability for students facing particular challenges in their life outside the college gates, or in areas where there are community tensions. You know this of course: many of you are dealing with these sorts of issues every day. But I know that Government needs to be better at recognising and valuing this too.

When DfE thinks about safeguarding or supporting vulnerable young people or data sharing, we need to think about that in relation to colleges as well as schools and other providers. And while the response to the challenges that colleges face has to be a local response to local circumstances – building relationships with your local police, health and social services are important, and there may be things that we can do nationally to make that easier for you.

For example, making sure that the Home Office has a good understanding of colleges and the role they play as they lead the work to tackle knife crime and gangs. We are discussing how best we can do this with the AoC and others, and we will continue to do that.

In the area of mental health, which is probably one of the biggest issues amongst young people today, colleges are having to do ever increasing work to support their students.

We are also providing significant new support in this area via the green paper proposals introducing new Mental Health Support Teams to support those students with mild to moderate needs and promote good mental health and wellbeing.

The mental health teams will build on and increase support already in place, not replace it. They will be rolled out gradually over the next five years to one-fifth and a quarter of the country by the end of 2022-23. The first teams will be operational by the end of this year.

I am sure everyone here is aware of the move to put Hadlow College into education administration under the new Insolvency Regime we have introduced.

This is not a decision we have taken lightly – we have been working with, and supporting the college, providing emergency support to keep it going while we investigated the problems and developed options to secure its future. Administration is one of the tools we've decided to use to deliver a long-term plan.

I thank David Hughes for his recent TES article on this matter and recognition that we are doing this in the best interests of students, staff, local community and FE sector. As he says – we will strive for a good outcome.

David is right that this is worrying for the sector and that it is a time for reflection and learning lessons – for all of us.

But I hope colleges can take heart from the amount of effort and resources we're putting into sorting out the problems: our top priority is making sure that students in Kent, like everywhere else in the country, have access to high quality further education.

We will have an external review to look at the systems within the DfE, so that problems with financial management are identified at the earliest possible stage.

I know many of you will be frustrated that with resources scarce, time, effort and money is being spent on sorting out the problems in a poorly managed college. Believe me, I'm frustrated too. I would much rather we spent this money supporting excellence. I want to be able to show Treasury that every penny put into further education is spent wisely. But it is important that we stabilize the sector when needed, so we can bring all colleges up to the same high standards.

Most of you and your governing bodies are brilliant at squeezing the last drop out of the money you get. Hadlow, sadly, shows us that this is not yet universal, and there are a few other cases that are of course of concern. But I know many of you give time, including the AoC, to make that list ever diminishing.

I don't want to sidestep any difficult issues – key issue I have been hearing over the past 2 years – is College funding.

We know further education (FE) faces cost pressures which can have a direct impact on squeezing investment in the sector's most valuable resource – its people. We have been working with the sector to ensure the system can support sustainable, high-quality education, and effective recruitment and retention of teachers and leaders.

As you are aware, the Government review of Post-18 Education and Funding will be concluding soon – it has been examining the post 18 system in England and how post 18 provision is funded across HE and FE has been a key aspect of the review.

The forthcoming Spending Review also gives us an opportunity to make a compelling case for the future investment that the sector and its people need.

My ask to you is to work closely with us to make sure that we have the evidence we need to make that case, and to ensure that funding goes where it will make the greatest positive difference.

I am of course aware of the Love Our Colleges Campaign and fully support the sentiment. It is good to know what your relative priorities are as part of that campaign, including those recommendations set out in the AoC's recent analysis into skills investment.

I would like to thank the AoC for our continued good work together. I mentioned earlier the work on knife crime – and the AoC works closely with us in other areas such as in Taking Teaching Further, the crucial work of the Education & Training Foundation, the research advisory group and responses to our consultations.

I am aware that David Hughes has recently set out some principles in TES that should guide the qualifications review – which will be a helpful contribution to the discussion started by the consultation.

I believe that through the AoC, the Department is able to get closer to the FE sector – through events such as today – which can only be a good thing.

I want to make as good a case as I can for the sector.

There is much that will need to be negotiated with Treasury and I wish I could – but I can't – guarantee what will be possible, but I can guarantee that I will work as hard as I can in making the case for FE.

I can tell you though that something has changed. I was struck that a few months ago the first 15 minutes of the hour that is set aside for oral education questions in the House of Commons was about FE Colleges. That is a shift from MPs, and largely due to the AoC's campaign.

I was also at a high-level meeting recently and every person present mentioned further education, – for the first time I am seeing FE mentioned first.

The mood has changed – because with your help we have changed the mood, the narrative about post 16 education and the understanding of the vital part you play in education and training.

I make no apology for repeating what I said at the beginning. FE Colleges change lives. You are the engine of social mobility in this country and unleash opportunities for individuals who would otherwise be constrained in what they can do.

I don't hold the purse strings, but I know that together we have made people in and around Government and Parliament realise the true value of what you do. They now realise that in addition to the strong case for what you do for individuals, there is an ever-growing economic case.

Thank you for all your work. Thank you for the continued and extraordinary efforts you make on behalf of many people in this country. And thank you for never giving up in your mission.