

Taxing development

The government wants to speed more housebuilding, but it also wants to tax development. It proposes a new infrastructure tax to replace the existing system.

It is true the gap between land values with permission to build homes and land values for land without any building permission is huge. It is also true the wider community incurs large costs from more housebuilding. There needs to be more schools, surgeries, roads, power lines, broadband cables and the rest. All parties have accepted the idea that there should be some infrastructure levy or contribution to public sector infrastructure costs, just as securing private sector services may entail direct payments to the service providers. The government does not mention the need for compensation payments to existing homeowners, though there are clear cases where the amenity and value of their property is hit by more traffic and noise, worse views etc. Developers who want speedy progress sometimes offer compensation to reduce opposition to a scheme.

The Section 106 payments system has been a negotiation between Councils and developers. Many Councils have wanted to take the money to build more homes for rent instead of using the money to build the roads, schools and surgeries needed. The sums have expanded to try to accommodate both needs. The government has also introduced an additional Infrastructure levy.

The new levy proposed is only set out in outline. It is national with maybe a single national rate or rates. It might also have regional or local variations. It seeks to flex according to land and home prices, allowing developers to make a given margin before the levy kicks in. In falling markets the levy would fall and in rising markets it would rise. That is a sensible feature.

I would urge simplicity and suggest a per house levy to cover the obvious public sector infrastructure costs. The government wishes to increase this tax, which will make achieving more home building more difficult.

Given that many people want fewer new homes with reduced migration, what do you think would be sensible by way of a tax on new developments?

On line meeting with Schools Minister

I dialled in to Nick Gibb's briefing yesterday about the forthcoming exam results. He set out the position as I did on my blog yesterday. He agreed it would have been better for all pupils to be able sit the exams, and for these to be marked by independent teachers who do not know the pupils as before.

Instead we have a second best system where compromises have been made by the Examining Boards to try to award meaningful qualifications to pupils who have done the work but not taken the exam.

The Exam Boards and their Regulator have decided they do need to adjust the results proposed by teachers. They stressed to teachers they want them to concentrate on getting the right order in their list of student results, so the Board knows who they think would have done best and who would have done worst in the exam. The general adjustments to the teacher scores will not affect the rankings of pupils school by school. The Examining Boards are going to adjust some school results downwards, keeping the proposed order, as in aggregate teacher's assessments can produce considerably better results than past years.

This of course can produce injustices for pupils and schools that are improving on previous years. In some cases it may favour the school or pupil and will go unchallenged. The appeals and exam options allow individuals and their schools to bring evidence that the adjusted grades are not fair because they are too low. Any constituent who is worried about their grade or their children's grades should talk to their school about the possibility of an appeal or the exam option.

The truth in each case is we can never be sure how well that student would have performed in exam conditions on the day. There will remain a degree of approximation in some cases. The important thing is for pupils to get a sufficient grade to go on to the next stage. Those who move from GCSE can prove they are better in their A levels if they feel their grade was wrong, and those who move to university can prove themselves better in University exams when they get there.

BA should listen to its staff

Constituents are understandably writing to me about the words and actions of BA.

I have condemned the way IAG has treated their staff and written to them urging them to be fairer to their employees. I have also questioned the worse treatment for BA relative to other airlines they own. I have drawn attention to the strong financial position of IAG despite the temporary large loss of paying passengers.

I have urged the government to do more to allow safe returns to work for as many people as possible, and to work with the aviation industry on recovery. I understand the anger of my constituents who have worked well for BA over the years and who feel the airline's shareholders and top management have let them down at this time when they need help and support.

Levelling up needs the schools back

During the long lock downs some pupils have been able to benefit from a full timetable of on line lessons and lectures, and to have home work marked over the internet by engaged teachers. I praise all those teachers and schools that adapted and did a good job ensuring their students did not go without education.

Other schools provided childcare and maybe some education for the children of key workers but delivered little for the rest. Some managed work assignments for homeworking. It meant the gap started to get bigger again between those who had the advantage of a full timetable of lessons and those who did not.

Some schools in the private sector did decide they had to deliver a full timetable and challenging home coursework, as the parents expected something for the fees they were paying. The danger is the response to CV 19 has increased the gap between some in the private sector that got a good education during the lockdowns, and some in the state sector who got little by way of teaching. That is not going to help the government with its good aim of levelling up.

The government made clear it would assist in supplying digital devices so pupils in households where on line access was a problem would be helped. As schools prepare for the return in September they need to look at how they can best meet the need for every pupil to have the benefit of good lessons and marked homework for the older pupils.

Teachers rightly tell us they want to teach and believe the daily contact between pupil and teacher is an important part of growing up and gaining skills for life. The way in which each school meets the demands on it and looks after its pupils is mainly a matter for school and local determination. Teachers are valued professionals, and we look forward to seeing their solutions for this autumn as pupils go back to school. It is most important we level up, which does require us to deliver the best possible education to those from difficult backgrounds. We may also be able to use more of the digital technology in developing those crucial relationships.

Exam results

There may be a row in England, as there has been in Scotland, over this summer's GCSE and A level results.

The first thing to stress is the award of grades to students has nothing to

do with Ministers and the government. Normally students take exams set by independent Examining bodies, advised and moderated by teachers, with all the work marked by teachers. The Exam body then awards grades based on the marks awarded, seeking to moderate standards between years. Ministers rightly do not get a say in any individual's papers or marks, or in the decision each year on where to set the grade boundaries.

This year the decision was taken to abandon exams but to award grades and passes based primarily on teacher assessment of the individual's course work and achievements at school in each subject. The Exam Boards will still moderate the results fed to them by each of the participating schools. There are issues over how this will be done.

If all worked well each school would come to a perfect judgement of each pupil it teaches, and across England this would produce a fair set of outcomes without moderation or adjustment. However, life is not that simple. The Examining Boards want the schools to ensure they have placed all their pupils in the right relative order to each other, reserving to themselves the ultimate right to decide how marks translate to grades awarded by the Examining Board. The Examining Boards are alert to the possibility that teachers will naturally see the best in their own pupils and might collectively mark up producing some grade inflation compared to previous years. They need, however, to be alert to other possibilities as well. For any individual pupil there is the danger of adverse marking if they planned to leave much of their study and revision to close to the exam and did not do so well in the early months of the course, or if their conduct and attitudes did not lead the teacher to see their academic strengths fully.

The toughest cases are for schools or subject teachers who are lifting standards year by year or lifting them for the first time this year who may encounter a general downgrade of their forecast results owing to the Exam Board wishing to moderate grades in relation to past experience at that school. There is also the unspoken danger that a school or subject area on the slide will secure more favourable outcomes than if their pupils had had to undertake the exam. The Independent Regulator is also involved in requiring Exam Boards to moderate standards.

Most people would agree it is better and fairer to let pupils sit exams and to have these marked by teachers at other schools to a prescribed marking scheme. In this CV 19 damaged year all involved will doubtless do the best they can to come to fair judgements, but there is likely to be more unhappiness both by some individuals and by some individual schools and teachers given the occasional rough justice which will be delivered. The good news is a student can appeal and can ask to sit a proper exam to improve their grade.