



8th April 2019: Response to the article on funding in the Newbury Weekly News.

Thank you for writing about and keeping the public informed about the funding crisis in education (Newbury News: 4th April 2019). This letter addresses clarifies some of the points raised in the article.

Whilst it is true that the government funding is higher now than ever before, there is an even larger increase in the number of pupils, funding per pupil has not kept up with inflation and schools have to pay for increased employment costs – it was unfunded pay increases last year, now the immediate concern is pension costs – again without an increase in funding. Although the government has addressed the issue of pension costs – it is just for this financial year. Additional pension costs for a school the size of Willink is £120K. This means these additional costs come out of the money schools receive per pupil. So, there is less per pupil.

With regard to Willink's budget, we came in at the end of the 2017-18 financial year with a deficit of £98K. At the time the next few years was looking bleak. We had to make savings – this principally was in support staff, so we restructured. We made three positions/roles redundant last year and had to pay the redundancies – hence a licenced (agreed) deficit of £311K for 2018-19 to be paid back within 5 years. Incidentally, primary schools in West Berkshire and secondary schools in other LAs have their costs of redundancies paid for them. However, we have come in at the end of the 2018-19 financial year with a deficit of £160K. So, overall it is much better news. Hopefully we can come out of deficit, if not by April 2020, within two more years rather than another four as planned in the licensed deficit agreement.

Whilst the Willink is the LA maintained school with the biggest deficit – in absolute figures not so as a percentage of income - your article omits reference to academies. Seven of the ten secondaries in West Berkshire are academies. It is important that the public are also aware that the funding crisis also affects academies - academy finances are not the remit of the Schools Forum. The funding crisis manifests itself in cuts to services that support more vulnerable pupils, reduced curriculum options, larger class sizes, reduced extra-curricular opportunities, being taken over by a multi-academy trust, drawing on financial reserves. Funding along with the teacher staff shortages remain the greatest concern of all Secondary Heads – whether academy or maintained.

With regard to your request for information about supplying equipment such as stationery and textbooks, parents of pupils in years 7-11 are not asked to pay for day to day paper, books or other stationery. Pupils are expected to have a pencil case of basic equipment as they always have – they can, if they choose, conveniently purchase this through the school at a lower cost than the high street. Parents do pay for an art sketchbook, ingredients for food lessons and we ask for a contribution towards materials in design technology - on the understanding the food and the design product is then taken home. If pupils lose books or if occasionally they become destroyed or their dogs eats them, they are expected to pay for a replacement. This payment arrangement has been established over the years and is not a response to the funding shortages. We have a duty to provide basic equipment and resources and this we do. We have recently surveyed parents of our current year 7 as to the most convenient way of making payments.

Nor do parents of pupils in years 7-11 pay for textbooks. There are books e.g. revision guides or anthologies that pupils may wish to keep, and these can be bought, again at a reduced price, through the school. This is also fairly common practice in secondary schools. In the Sixth Form, as in other institutions of further education, parents are either asked for a contribution toward the course or they are able to buy books at a reduced rate through the school. We also provide additional resources such as revision guides to families experiencing financial hardship at no cost to them. Likewise, we support disadvantaged students by providing financial support towards uniform and school trips.