



**HOUSE OF COMMONS**  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Rt Hon Justine Greening MP  
Secretary of State for Education  
Department for Education

Tuesday, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2017  
Ref: RAC/eq/F

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to you in order to participate in the Schools National Funding Formula Phase 2 public consultation. I confirm that I am happy for this letter to be published publicly alongside the Government's response on gov.uk.

I have decided to respond to this public consultation specifically and I want to make clear my concerns about the impact of the proposed formula on schools in West Oxfordshire.

I also include copies of letters I have received from concerned schools in my constituency as an appendix which **I would ask not to be published online**. They will in most, if not all, cases, have made their own consultation responses through the website, but their letters to me make concise, powerful reading and I would urge you to consider them very carefully. I shall not rehearse all of their points here but concentrate on some of the most important.

At the outset, may I say that I am pleased that the funding formula has the *potential* to address the historic inequalities that exist between similar schools, but I do feel that as it stands, it needs further work.

Oxfordshire is an f40 county and has suffered from underfunding for many years. For example: pupils in Oxfordshire attract as much as £2,500 less each year than similar pupils in Tower Hamlets. Let me make clear that I fully agree with the Government's policy intention: to ensure that every school and local area, regardless of location, are fairly funded according to need. However, as you know, the choice of factors and the weighting these are given are crucial in ensuring the formula's success in achieving this aim. When looking at the figures as they affect West Oxfordshire, this does not seem to be the case.

The figures in the current consultation show Oxfordshire as a whole gaining around £2.9 million in the first year of the new formula, about £30 per pupil, rising to £3.95 in 2019-20, about £45 per pupil. Whilst an overall increase on 1.5% will certainly be welcome, there will remain a large gap between the most and least generously funded schools. This has cause for some concern, particularly when coupled with rising costs expected to be around 8% between 2016-17 and 2019-20.



As it stands, however, the proposed formula does have the unexpected, and unintended, consequence of some schools in the lowest funded Local Authorities actually losing money, *particularly those in rural areas such as West Oxfordshire*. So in Oxfordshire overall, there will be 133 benefiting from this change, and 130 being adversely affected. The maximum gain is £175,000 and the maximum loss is £41,000 per year. Specifically, in West Oxfordshire, 31 will lose funding while 24 will gain funding. West Oxfordshire as whole has had lower levels of funding when compared to other parts of the country. I would like to see all schools receive the funding they need and it seems unfair that schools that have historically received lower levels of funding are due to see their funding decrease.

The effect is however compounded: of those who are losing funding, the overwhelming majority are small and rural schools - the ones least able to absorb any funding cuts. I believe that this outcome has been created by the factors used to create the formula, and the weightings given to each. For example, the sparsity factor does not benefit most of the rural schools in my area. This is because Oxfordshire County Council is committed to keeping village schools open, wherever possible, a commitment with which I agree. This means that these rural schools are not far enough apart to trigger additional funding under the current conditions, and the calculation does not account adequately for the fact that the travel time between them means that they are much more remote than would appear to be the case by an "as the crow flies" measurement.

While it is right that the additional demands of deprivation, including lower prior attainment, are reflected in any formula, this must not receive such a heavy weighting that it is at the detriment of rural schools in an area like West Oxfordshire. This point is particularly true given that the Pupil Premium remains an additional payment for many of the same children. As an area with low levels of deprivation, the weighting given to these factors hits schools in West Oxfordshire particularly hard: it is a form of double counting.

I am also concerned that the effect of the 3% funding floor will be to consolidate the historical funding differences, which will remove the effect of a fair funding formula, and mean that those schools in lower-funded areas like West Oxfordshire will be subsidising those in better funded areas.

I draw these points to your attention as I am sure this overall outcome was not intended in the creation of the funding formula. I would be grateful if you could look again into this matter and consider further measures to ensure the schools which already receive little funding are not left worse off.

Potential solutions to explore could include: increasing the basic pupil funding so that every child attracts the minimum funding necessary for basic resources, meaning less pressure on schools to increase in size in order to be sustainable. Linked to this, as each school has certain unavoidable costs irrespective of size and location, perhaps the lump sum could be increased to reflect these baseline costs: a *de minimis* funding level, as it were. This would ensure that every school would have the funding it needed to stay open: truly fair funding.



I have already made this suggestion in person to the Minister for Schools. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State and the Department for Education would look into this guarantee of essential funding for every school. It seems to me to be a logical step to ensure that village schools (which are, by their very nature, small, due to their limited catchment area) have this key funding to cover their unavoidable overheads. The fact is that it costs a certain amount to keep a much-needed local school open. Given that they have already been making savings over many years to be more efficient, it is unfortunate that these rural schools in my constituency are set to have a decrease in funding.

I applaud the intention to remove a funding inequality which has existed amongst schools for decades. However, I believe the proposals would benefit from some of the above changes to avoid these unintended adverse consequences. As things stand, f40's comment in their 10th March 2017 letter to the Prime Minister that there is a danger of "*replacing one injustice with another*" would seem to have relevance in relation to my constituency, whereby over half of the schools, overwhelmingly small rural schools, actually lose funding.

Many thanks in advance and I look forward to seeing the wider results of this consultation.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Courts".

**Robert Courts MP**