

Meeting of the Association of Sandwell Governing Bodies (ASGB)

with James Morris MP on 11th October 2019 2.00pm held at

Ormiston Forge Academy Cradley Heath

Present:

Mr James Morris - MP Rowley Regis and Halesowen

Mr Gary Sambrook – Assistant to Mr Morris

Miss Lynne Foster - Support Officer ASGB and Moat Farm Junior

Ms Sarah Harding – Temple Meadow Primary

Mr Chris Harris – Reddal Hill Primary and Ormiston Sheffield Community Academy

Mrs Lynn Howard – Lyng Primary and Co-Chair ASGB Executive

Dr. Lisa Mason – Ormiston Forge Academy (Head Teacher)

Mr Colin Nicholls – St. Michaels CofE High School

Informal Notes to be shared with ASGB members:

After introductions, Lynn Howard, co-chair of ASGB told Mr Morris that the meeting was an opportunity for Sandwell governors to talk directly to him about the issues that were affecting their schools. She explained that ASGB had previously had two meetings with Adrian Bailey MP and that he had shared with governors, their concern about school funding and the cuts that schools had been forced to make in order in an attempt to balance their budgets. Having focused on cuts to music in schools, Mr Bailey had agreed to table the issue as an adjournment debate.

Details of the cuts to music and the impact on the children in Sandwell were passed to Mr James with the hope that he would also offer his support.

Members were given an opportunity to raise issues with Mr Morris, summarised as follows:

Ms. Harding shared how her school had been forced to restructure as it was impossible to re-staff, thus adding to the workload of staff, with the resulting impact on morale and mental health, giving examples.

She also talked about the impact on the self-esteem of children as a result of the 'testing culture' in schools, made even more difficult because of the reduction (due to budgets) of the pastoral team and in community work.

Mrs Howard added that the Local Authority had also been forced to restructure and the same resulting loss in support for schools.

Mr Morris acknowledged the importance of support for mental health and felt that the major new initiative would provide better integration between schools and mental health services. He referred to the White Paper 'Child and Adult Mental Health' which was committed to addressing the issues.

There was a short discussion during which, everyone agreed that generally, there was better a better understanding about mental health and more information available. Blackheath Primary School's mental health support policy was so successful that it had been fed into a Government Green Paper.

The point was made that teachers should not be expected to be experts in mental health.

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Mr Morris advised that Wales had made good progress in tackling mental health issues (see link below).

Profound changes were needed and earlier intervention was imperative but governors challenged, more funding was needed.

Returning to the issue of testing, Mr Morris said that the education policy for the last twenty or thirty years had been all about raising standards, to reduce the variation and raise the bar. However, there was perhaps now, a need for a legitimate discussion as whether there should be a 'rebalance'.

Reddal Hill was, Mr Harris said, a pilot school for the Y4 multiplication tests whereby children had to complete 25 questions in 60 seconds. This was already causing anxiety, adding to concerns about too much testing.

Responding, Mr Morris advised that he and Nick Gibb, met regularly with Dudley and Sandwell authorities to look at testing and fed back their findings to the DfE, highlighting where marking policy, for example, needed to be reviewed.

Mr Nicholls raised the issue of PFI schools and the financial burden this placed on his school. This obviously impacted on staffing. NQT's had replaced more experienced staff but the loss of this experience was also a concern. As with almost all Sandwell schools, the three year projected budget was 'dire'.

Mr Morris responded that the PFI contracts had been signed before he became an MP but looking at them subsequently, it was obvious that they were flawed.

The issue of PFI schools had already been raised with him and he had spoken to the DfE on the matter. The DfE was supposed to have been back in touch with St. Michaels and as this had not yet happened, Mr. Morris promised to chase it up.

Quoting from the Government announcement on the day of this meeting, Mr Morris was able to confirm the percentage increase and notional amount per pupil for each of the schools with governors in attendance.

Mr Morris referred to the increase in teachers' pension costs and the Government's pledge to 'plug the gap', funding the increase for future years. A member noted that it had been a concern that this funding might be 'rolled up' into school budget and presented as part of the overall increase but was assured that this was not the case. Schools would receive all the funding indicated by the recent announcement. Figures should be available on the DfE website.

A further commitment from the Government was to raise the starting salary of NQT to £30k to help with recruitment. Whilst this was welcomed by governors, they made it clear that whilst salary was a factor, so was the stress of the job. They were also concerned about how schools would afford the increases.

Dr. Mason, head of a secondary trust school, talked about top-slicing by the Trust and working with Sandwell LA. She expressed her concern about the tensions originating from Ofsted which expected a 'broad and balanced' curriculum yet still judged success of a school on outcomes.

Alternative Provision was raised with Mr Morris, in addition to the length of time it could take to process an EHCP (up to 18 months). In Dr. Mason's experience, Sandwell responded better than Dudley with regard to urgent reviews.

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Mr Morris told members that he had met with Halesowen parents who also had concerns about the delays but hoped that the appointment of a new Director of Education in Dudley would have a positive impact on timescales.

The number of places available and the quality of provision were also issues. There were not enough places in establishments that did offer excellent provision. Peer to peer reviews had taken place in Sandwell but the outcomes were not yet available.

Attendance and the quality of education were difficult for schools to monitor despite the responsibility of the school because of dual registration.

Mr Morris acknowledged these genuine concerns and told governors that he had spoken to Mr Robert Halfon, Education select committee chair about the need for more supply provision and the potential risks surrounding dual registration.

Dr. Mason stated that permanent exclusions were rare in her school because she was aware that bad quality provision could easily lead to young adults ending up in the criminal justice system. The best alternative provision was very costly.

Other members agreed and examples were shared.

Mr Morris acknowledging the discussion, also referred to the cost/benefit impact of placing a pupil in care. Constituents often raised Children's Services issues with him. SEN (increasingly autism), delays in the system, high turnover of staff and under-funding were all big issues that needed to be sorted.

He advised that the SEN budget would increase (1 year increase) by 11% under the recent announcements; that more money (£14b) had been promised over the next three years. A member added however, that that promise needed to be kept but that the loss of the LA support services was also a big factor for schools.

In response to a question, Mr Morris assured governors that the outcome of Brexit would not affect the Government's three year commitment.

Finally there was a short discussion about the opposition's proposal to scrap Ofsted. Members felt that there did need to be some form of regulation and that it should be reformed rather than scrapped. Mr Morris agreed that there should be a discussion about the framework but that there needed to be consistency and transparency on performance as well as an incentive to drive up standards.

Meeting closed at 2.50pm

The chair thanked Mr Morris MP, Mr Sambrook and governors for their attendance and the meeting closed at 2.50pm.

Thanks also to Ormiston Forge Academy for hosting the meeting, we appreciated your very kind hospitality!

(See over for outcomes and links)

As a result of the meeting, we hope that Mr Morris will:

- Support an adjournment debate on music in schools if/when tabled by Adrian Bailey MP.
- Continue to support/promote the importance of mental health in schools.
- Pursue discussions with Nick Gibb regarding a 'rebalance' of the testing regime in schools and a possible 'reform' of Ofsted.
- Ensure that the DfE get back in touch with St. Michael's to discuss PFI issues.
- Continue to monitor the performance of Dudley and Sandwell Children's Services.
- Continue to monitor and influence with Mr Halfon, where possible, regarding increase in alternative provision.

Links with reference to meeting discussion:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/sep/25/wales-schoolchildren-receive-early-help-mental-health-problems>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-to-learn-funding-allocations-following-14-billion-pledge>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/teacher-workload-cut-by-five-hours-a-week-over-past-three-years>