

Councillor James McInnes
Cabinet Member for Children Services and Schools



Secretary of State for Education
Gavin Williams

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20 October 2020

Dear Mr Williamson,

I am writing to you as deputy leader of Devon County Council and the Cabinet Member responsible for schools as well as the National Chairman of f40.

I want to highlight the difficulties that many schools in Devon, and nationally, are having in trying to balance their budgets because of the extra costs of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis.

Schools in Devon have done a remarkable job since the start of the pandemic in providing an education for our children. First for the children of key workers and vulnerable children, later for all pupils in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 in our primaries and then for Years 10 and 12 in our secondaries.

Since the start of the new academic year in September all of our schools have been open to all pupils. Despite a number of schools having to send home some year groups or bubbles to self-isolate, our latest figures show a 93 percent attendance rate.

So our schools and my hard-pressed education officers have done everything that has been asked of them, particularly in giving parents the reassurances on safety they needed to send their children back to the classroom in the first place.

Apart from the human cost, this has also come at a financial cost. Schools have been scrupulous in ensuring their premises have been kept clean and stocked with hand sanitiser and other essentials, but this has meant a considerable increase in their bills for cleaning and caretaking.

The latest instruction to provide tailored home learning for pupils having to self-isolate has greatly increased the pressure on teachers who are finding they have to do this on top of their classroom teaching duties.

And when teachers are required to self-isolate, their heads are having to find extra funds to pay for supply teachers to take up the strain.

In Devon all this is compounded by the historic under-funding of our schools compared to the national average.

I am only too aware of the huge obstacles the Government has had to overcome during this unprecedented crisis and the vast amount of money that continues to be spent in supporting the people of this country.

But I would point out that our children – and so their parents – have paid a very high price for protecting the health of this nation and particularly our older and more vulnerable people. The time is now right to re-balance that situation.

I would like to emphasise that I welcome the extra funding that has been made available to education and your Government's commitment to levelling up school finance in areas like Devon. However, much of the additional funds that schools have received have been dissipated by the costs of Covid in hiring supply teachers, ensuring virtual learning is in place, organising one-to-one learning for self-isolating pupils and ever more rigorous cleaning and caretaking.

The National Association of Head Teachers says that in just the first few weeks of term, schools have spent an average of £8,017 on enhanced cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment, hand-washing stations and other measures.

No one is disputing that the costs of this pandemic will not have to be paid for in time but I would urge you, as Education Secretary, to ensure our schools have the resources they need now to continue to provide a Covid-safe education for their pupils. I believe education has to be one of our top priorities for extra spending so we can restore the terrible loss of learning that our children have suffered as a result of this crisis.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James McInnes', written in a cursive style.

James McInnes