

Letter from Westminster

I WAS in the House of Commons even earlier than usual on Budget day. MPs meet over breakfast in the

Members' Tea Room to digest the newspapers and discuss what the Chancellor might pull from his hat. One Budget surprise that was nothing

of the sort of course was the plan to see all state schools become academies.

It was all over the media that morning but I knew right away this would cause a great deal of interest back home so had emailed - and had a response from - a number of our secondary heads before breakfast was through.

Some 85 per cent of schools in Hampshire are already "good" or "outstanding" (that figure rises to 94 per cent in the Winchester district) so it would be very strange if I didn't question any proposed change.

Headteachers tell me they get a first rate service from the county council which would, in part at least, explain why so few schools have chosen to become academies so far. They also tell me that partnership working across the area (among secondary, primary, CofE and non CofE schools) is better than it's been for years and I agree that must be protected.



There is widespread confusion in our area as to what is broken here that needs fixing by such a radical prescription and that phrase clearly caught the mood. I am however, acutely aware that we could be in danger of a 'we're alright Jack' mentality. Surely, children in Lancashire deserve the same standard of education and the same life chances as children in Hampshire so the Government is right to demand educational excellence everywhere.

That is why I also urged Ministers to not let the bad be the enemy of the good. We do need things to change where schools are failing young people - for their sakes and that of our economy longer term - but we should not do that by a one size fits all that damages what is already working and the Government understands that.

I met one-on-one with the Secretary of State, Nicky Morgan, last week and we're in daily contact. I have been clear in communicating the views from constituency heads and challenging her to clarify the future of small rural settings as well as special schools, such as Shepherds Down.

Ultimately, any change needs to find a way whereby high performing councils (such as Hampshire) can carry on delivering the services and support schools here clearly value while undergoing the kind of scrutiny that will make them even better and weed out any complacency.

All of this remains the focus of discussions I am having with Hampshire, the Diocese (who are a key player in this regardless of what Government does next), the university, teachers and Ministers.

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